fixing the match, capping the hand

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fixing the match, capping the hand

by BenevolentErrancy

Summary

A lot of things were out of Xie Lian's control.

Almost everything that had happened in that hut. Winding up in the painful crush of noise and touch and smell that made up Ghost City. Being gambled away to the Ghost King that ruled over it all.

Waking up in a soft bed with a helpful youth named San Lang who only seemed to want to ensure his comfort was one of the more pleasant options.

Notes

I have been lovingly bullied into providing some actual comfort to my hurt, so here we are! Part Two baby! It has gotten away from me!!

If you're just tuning in I recommend reading Part One first, but if you're really not into whump (can't relate) and just want to join in for the recovery then I'll summarize things in the end notes

- Translation into Русский available: Исправляя встречу, покрывая руку by ChaoticSpace

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Xie Lian woke from unconsciousness to a vision of white.

It was buoyed in on waves of wracking pain, coming and going in a frothy sea of hurt. There was nothing shocking about this, but it was always unsettling. It meant that the nail must have been disturbed, that his brain had received new damage, that the tissue was trying to fix things well enough to allow his senses to restructure themselves. It never failed to make Xie Lian fear that this would be the time that the tissue would fail to repair properly, or that the nail had settled in a position that could not be overcome; perhaps this was the time his world would become nothing but whiteness and senselessness and confusion and pain. Perhaps this time.

Perhaps this time.

He faded out with the mystery unsolved. Awareness was like that sometimes though, a push and pull of too-sharp clarity and dulled abstraction and then sometimes disappearing entirely. It was useless to fight, and so Xie Lian rarely did. He let himself come and go from himself. It wasn't like either state was particularly better than the other after all — there was plenty he was happy to be unaware of after all, and the pain was always a pleasure to leave.

Awareness rolled back in. It was still white. A heavy, oppressive aura pressed in around the edges of his head so fiercely it felt like squeezed clay. Killing intent was like black bile on his tongue. Was he about to die again? Even at his angriest, the man had never felt like this.

What had Xie Lian done?

The whiteness in his vision shifted strangely, fluttered and moved, and he faded out.

Someone was talking above his head. He could feel the shape of words drag across his brain, much like the feel of the hands touching his back or the legs beneath his head. He was being bracketed by a body.

His stomach twisted and he wanted to scream. He wasn't sure where he was. The lap was clothed, fabric bunching beneath his cheek, but that could change. It didn't smell like the man but scents sometimes got as mixed up as sight so that wasn't reliable. Where was the man? Where was Xie Lian?

The white was moving more and more, less like the loss of sight he was used to and more like a wall of maggots were squirming in front of his eyes. Or spend catching and dripping through his hair, down his face, covering his eyes.

He was going to throw up.

Instead he faded away while the voices spoke. His input never mattered on these occasions anyway.

The next time awareness rolled it, the rest of the world rolled with it. He may not have known where he had been before, but he certainly knew where he was now. A boat, an ocean, on waves that tossed him up and down and threatened to drown him. He reached out — reached! Surely he wasn't meant to be able to move his arms like this? — desperately reaching for anything to stabilize himself with, and in doing so found his eyes opening.

The dominant colour was not white this time or even black but a red so vibrant that it made his eyes sting. He still saw white, but it was in strange, moving spots, as if they too were swimming through waves.

No, not swimming, as if they were flying. They had wings. He blinked, trying desperately to force the world to make any sense, but he had long since learnt that the tighter he held the more fragments everything would inevitably break into. He groaned. Perhaps he wasn't on the waves after all, but flying like the white-silver butterflies crossing his vision.

He wanted the ground. He wanted to be allowed to curl on the flat, stable ground.

"Stop," he begged.

To his utter amazement, the rocking stopped. He couldn't remember the last time his words had impacted his world for the better. He found himself tensing, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Or maybe for himself to drop, if he truly was up in the air.

That might be alright, so long as it meant getting to stay on the ground he inevitably struck.

"Gege? Gege how do you feel?"

He could almost make sense of these words, but they were too big, too close, too sharp, nails in his head. He blinked and salt stung at his eyes. It was all too much, he didn't understand any of it.

"Please, gege? *Dianxia* ."

Xie Lian stopped breathing. A nail had been driven into him, not into his head, but somewhere in his chest. He shattered completely. He couldn't be here, he didn't want to be here, he slammed his eyes shut and dug for the pain in his head that made things fade and blur and drop away.

Like many times before, the lack of awareness was a blessing.

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Xie Lian woke from unconsciousness to a world of unparalleled luxury and unparalleled confusion.

The room around him was immediately in overwhelming focus, its colours and edges so clear and defined as to be startling. He was so used to things being slightly hazy, indistinct, processed several moments after having actually been viewed, that it felt like being slapped to see everything all at once like this.

He was in a bed that would have felt like a cloud, were he not an ex-god who had been up among the clouds and knew that what clouds actually felt like was mostly cold and wet. This was what a cloud was meant to feel like. It was big enough to swallow him entirely, and he was layered with blankets that were so deliciously soft that if he never moved again, Xie Lian would be perfectly alright with that.

Beyond that was a richly appointed room, strange only in that it was so opulent, for the overall taste was impeccable and the feng shui quite well balanced even at a glance. It was done in pale creams and golds. Everything about it was gentle. Easy on his strained, confused brain. It made no demands of him, simply let him roll his head against the soft pillow as his vision passed languidly from a privacy screen carved with birds and flowering vines, to a low table with a lightly steaming tea pot, to a round window with its paper screen shut to soften the harsh edges of the sunlight.

Xie Lian would have said it had to be a dream, except he wasn't sure he could dream up something like this. The last time he had been in a similar room had been before the fall of Xianle and those sorts of dreams never were restful like this.

That thought did sour some of the restfulness though. Because he really didn't know where he was or how he could have gotten here or why someone would want him here. Concern began to patter in his chest, as he reached into the ruins of his memory.

The man was, as always, his first thought. The smell of his breath, the feel of his blunt nails, the weight of his body, the taste of—

The man wasn't here.

The man left occasionally, to work, and Xie Lian would be left tethered like a dog, cord biting into his neck. Those had been almost peaceful times, when all he'd had was the floor against his cheek and silence. But his familiar floor was gone. The hut was gone. The man was gone. And that unsettled him, because that meant he didn't know when or how they would reappear.

His heart rate was picking up, and it was making the ache in his head worsen. He closed his eyes, shoved his fingers against them, and tried desperately to think.

He could remember the four walls of the hut. He could remember being in them, in many positions and many ways. He remembered another man in them, speaking about him. He vaguely remembered leaving, late in the night.

He remembered arriving at a city that had taken Xie Lian's brain in its maw and savaged it.

The memory of that pain was so intense that it made nerves spark, and left every other memory near it in shreds.

He remembered the colour red.

He remembered throwing up on a street and the noises.

He remembered a silent forest with soothing, welcoming mud.

He remembered kneeling under a table, and appreciating that slim moment of peace among agony.

What table though? What table had been accompanied by the scaled legs of a chicken, the musky smell between thighs, a rattling, rattling, rattling overhead like the sounds of a splintered skull knocking against a nail. The sound of dice, gambling lives and livelihoods.

Xie Lian sat up, too quick. Even before he was entirely upright he was bracing himself for the inevitable faintness and nausea.

And though it did come, it did not come in the way or severity that he expected. The world shifted, yes, but the pain did not consume him as it should. His head felt so light and empty that Xie Lian was briefly, irrationally terrified that it was about to float away.

But he couldn't even stop to think about that because he had remembered the gambling. The cultivator and the ghosts and being dragged before a dais. He remembered, what? Begging? Being lost, being won, being taken by a ghost who ruled an entire city of ghosts, begging at his feet. He remembered the worst pain of his life, and then fragments from there.

His confusion did not ease when he caught sight of a butterfly flitting just above his sight-line, though it was redirected. He remembered white moving wings.

He remembered asking for the rocking to stop and it had. There had been butterflies then too. They had been one of those rare things that didn't seem to want to hurt him. What did it mean, that one was here now?

"What are you?" he remarked to it as it fluttered.

It was quite large, perhaps the width of his palm, and seemed to shine with a silvery light. He had never seen such a creature before, and he couldn't imagine how it had come to be in here — unless the large windows behind his back had been open at some earlier point while Xie Lian had been unconscious.

It offered no response, but a similar flutter drew Xie Lian's attention away. A second butterfly sat on the low table near the bed. Unlike its brother, it seemed content to sun its wings lazily on the table. They were really quite beautiful, they belonged in a room like this much more than Xie Lian did. Could it be that they were kept as pets?

His vision entirely obscured by white wings that shifted and fluttered and—

Were they kept as pretty little things to be confined in a room, to be admired at their owner's discretion? Was Xie Lian here to join them?

Xie Lian let his eyes drift shut as he breathed out, shedding the thought as he did. There was no point in catastrophizing until he knew what state he was actually in. Much better to approach this strange new situation calmly.

Or so he thought, until he felt something touch the back of his head.

It was hardly a brush, like a finger running across his hair, but Xie Lian's body responded before he could even think about it. Eyes flew open, heart rate spiked, and his hand snapped back sharply, slapping against the back of his head, only thought to stop whatever was trying to touch him *there*—

Something gave beneath his palm, but it wasn't a hand. It wasn't even the metal head of a nail.

Xie Lian sat stock still as he felt fragile wings twitch beneath his hand. The other butterfly just sat on the table, watching.

Fingers nearly trembling, Xie Lian drew his hand back, and with it the crushed body of the silver butterfly. This close, cupped in Xie Lian's palms, he could see that it looked nearly as if it had been made of glass. The only thing that proved it wasn't was that it had not shattered, just crumpled. Broken legs and antenna twitched as its ruined wings tried to stretch.

All Xie Lian could do was stare at it.

It was hardly the worst thing he had ever done across his many centuries of life, but somehow, in this moment, with his head feeling so strange and airy and lost, it felt like it. Every other memory seemed to have fled from him, and all he had was the mutilated butterfly in his palm.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice hardly a croak between his lips. "I'm so sorry. I'm really… I'm really so sorry."

The words were perfectly useless, of course. Xie Lian swallowed, tried to catch his breath which was hitching, tried to think of what he should *do* but thoughts were sliding away from him, like water from a tiled roof. All he could think about were broken wings, and the one remaining butterfly which had flapped lazily from the table and was now creeping along Xie Lian's blanketed lap. Perhaps it was trying to find its fallen companion. Perhaps it just wanted to see the expression that was now hidden behind Xie Lian's curtaining hair, his head bowed in grief.

"I'm so sorry," and he wasn't sure which of the two he was addressing. The one dying in his hands, or the one about to be left alone.

Before he could decide though, there was a knock at the door.

Xie Lian's head lurched up and he stared. Somehow the very idea that other people could exist in this world besides himself and these two butterflies was vulgar.

The knowledge of who this knock must belong to did not help. There was only one other person that currently belonged in Xie Lian's world who was missing. He couldn't imagine the man in a room like this, couldn't imagine him allowing Xie Lian a luxury like this bed, couldn't even imagine him knocking rather than just entering, but there was really no other explanation for it.

He held the dying butterfly, and waited to join it.

And continued to wait, as the door remained shut.

Would he have to hold the sword above his own chest, and ask for it to be pressed down? But he couldn't keep waiting indefinitely, his nerves were strained, his head too sore, and the butterfly was still trembling in his palms.

"Enter," he called, and finally the door slid open.

A youth stood in the doorway, body tipped into a low bow. "Daozhang."

Xie Lian was tempted to close his eyes and disappear back under the soft blankets; today really was too strange and he was struggling to follow any of it. He wished it would all just disappear.

"Yes?" he said instead, because he didn't have the energy to try to make whatever was happening stop. He was already trapped in the throes of it.

"This one is called San Lang. I heard movement, I thought perhaps Daozhang was awake. I am here to see to whatever needs you might have. Is there anything I can assist with?"

Not the man. Which, in hindsight, made sense, because they had been in a gambling hall. The plan had always been Xie Lian's loss. He remembered a red dais. He remembered the crush of a killing aura so thick it had filled his throat. He supposed it made more sense that this house and this youth (and Xie Lian himself) belonged to a Ghost King, and that Xie Lian was here at his pleasure.

There was still a web of unsaid secrets tangled up in the youth's greeting though. Who exactly this San Lang was, and his role here. Where Xie Lian was, and what his purpose was now meant to be. What was within his right to demand and what wasn't, and what the youth expected him to ask for. In other situations, Xie Lian might be intrigued by this interesting new puzzle, especially when it came with such a soft bed, but right now he couldn't manage to stir such interest. His focus longed to return to the butterfly.

When Xie Lian didn't answer, San Lang's gaze glanced down to what was in his hands. "Ah, Daozhang caught a bug. Apologies for letting such things in the room. Toss it aside, and it will be tidied up."

Xie Lian recoiled, hands curling protectively around the little creature.

"I couldn't do that! I was the one that hurt it!"

The youth shrugged, indifferent. “It’s just a bug. And didn’t it dare crawl on Daozhang without permission? Surely you were within your rights to strike it.”

Xie Lian turned away from the youth, frowning. Perhaps he was overreacting, he knew that was possible, his emotions were all over the place. Some days it felt like they had been severed from him entirely, and other times they were so close to the surface that Xie Lian could hardly keep his head above them. But that didn’t relieve the regret he had for his actions, nor his wish to make things right.

“You asked me what I needed. May I make a request?”

San Lang seemed to perk up. “Yes, anything!”

“A cup of sugar water?”

Whatever San Lan had expected, this clearly hadn’t been it. He seemed briefly flummoxed, and Xie Lian took pity. He didn’t know who San Lang might answer to — he had only guesses — and he may need to justify such a strange request.

“Butterflies drink nectar. I know that they can be enticed with sugary liquids, so I thought perhaps if I place some out, it may help this one recover. It may be too late, but…”

But it may also not be. One memory was sliding uncomfortably close to the surface, almost grating against his mind as he thought of himself in much the same position. Without broken wings, perhaps, but very much crumpled in a heap, sword pinning him, beyond help and ignored until the very moment he wasn’t. He had been cursed at, derided, and then given a hat.

“Is Daozhang really so worried about one insignificant insect?” asked San Lang. When Xie Lian nodded, he said, “May I see it?”

He held out his hands to the youth, and San Lang finally approached. He stared down at the butterfly before his hand whipped out, snatching it from Xie Lian’s palms and crushing it immediately in a fist.

Xie Lian had barely begun to register his shock and horror before San Lang opened his palm and a perfectly intact butterfly flew out. It did a few laps near the ceiling before landing next to its partner.

At this rate, Xie Lian was going to need to lie back down in the bed because this constant whiplash of emotions was exhausting him after going so long without. But this joy was so profound that he couldn’t begrudge it.

“San Lang! That was amazing!”

“It was nothing. They aren’t even real butterflies, just spiritual creatures that belong to the lord of the manor.”

Xie Lian eased back a little, content to watch the butterflies. That answered quite a number of questions, then.

"If sugar water isn't necessary anymore, could I offer tea instead? I hear that is often considered an adequate substitute for cultivators when there are no butterflies around to drink nectar."

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile at San Lang's gentle prodding. The youth was clearly a kind and personable sort of fellow, and he seemed very keen to be useful, but Xie Lian's entire situation since waking had been such a turmoil that he really hadn't even had time to think about how he felt or what he needed. Tea would probably be good. He was fairly certain he was dehydrated, not having drank anything in some time, but he felt like he needed answers even more.

"May this one ask San Lang some questions first? Only… my memory is a little… it hasn't been reliable lately. I'm trying to make sense of some things."

"Then my memory is Daozhang's to use as much as he might need."

Xie Lian gave a huff, that in another life might have been a laugh. "San Lang is either much too generous or much too insincere!"

"Neither," he swore with such charming over-eagerness that Xie Lian could only smile helplessly at it.

"In that case, can you tell me where I am?"

"You're currently in a room of Paradise Manor, in Ghost City. The room is yours for as long as you want it."

An interesting choice of words. It implied it would either stop being Xie Lian's when he decided he wanted to leave on his own volition, or until he did something that marked him as ungrateful and he lost the privilege. Not knowing which was more likely was not particularly reassuring. It did help confirm that his memories of Ghost City, such as they were, had likely been accurate.

"And is Paradise Manor the home of the Ghost King, Hua Cheng?"

"It is," the youth confirmed. "He wishes only that your requests be answered and that you are made comfortable."

So Hua Cheng had won him in a game of dice, like he was some scuffed token. And now he was in a room in his manor, being made comfortable — for the time being, at least, he was not foolish enough to assume that whatever was true now would remain true forever. But now that he was groping for those over-saturated memories of the Gambler's Den, he made him remember something very important about that final game. A detail that was almost lost, for how insignificant it had felt at the time compared to everything else that had come before and after. It was a memory that brought a surge of fear and bile with it.

He wanted nothing more than to drop that memory, step away from it, avoid looking at the implications it held, but he was even more scared of not knowing. So he had to ask.

"And does Hua Cheng treat all his… recent acquisitions this way?"

Because he may be comfortable now, but he wasn't necessarily alone here, not when Hua Cheng had won two prizes, not one…

Let it not be said that San Lang was a fool; he seemed to understand what Xie Lian was implying immediately.

"Only those who deserve it. Daozhang needn't concern himself with trash."

That could mean anything of course. The man could have been banished from the city, could be dead, or could be in the room next door. There were, of course, many things Xie Lian hadn't needed to concern himself with while in that hut because there had been many, many things he had no ability to change. That didn't mean they had been pleasant. Just because he didn't concern himself about the man, didn't mean that Hua Cheng didn't have his own intentions for both of them.

(He had won them as a pair. Would he ever want to see them back together?)

"Regardless, I'm still curious," Xie Lian said carefully, because he had more or less been told to stop asking about it. He didn't want to upset his hosts already, but the not-knowing was tearing at his nerves like over-tightened guqin strings. It felt as if every moment he didn't know what had happened to the man, was a moment they threatened to snap under the pressure.

"Does Daozhang really care what Crimson Rain did with such filth?" said San Lang. "Daozhang needn't dirty himself by—"

"*Please tell me!* "

San Lang stiffened, and Xie Lian's hands jumped to his mouth, shocked by the bite in his own tone. But San Lang's words had caught on one of his jagged edges and he couldn't shake it free. Because he was already dirty. He felt it, he felt *filthy* and he would love to stop thinking about it all, but he couldn't, couldn't stop the way the memories rattled in his hollowed out skull like dice in a cup. If he kept thinking about it, even after being told to stop, how much dirtier must that make him? He couldn't stand it.

Xie Lian swallowed. "Apologies, I didn't mean to speak so roughly. If San Lang doesn't want to speak of it, it's of no consequence. Whoever I was with before is inconsequential in these new circumstances, I suppose."

In reality, Xie Lian knew very little about his new circumstances and so really he should be more cautious. Who was to say that his new master wasn't the jealous sort? Who was to say he wouldn't be angered to hear him talk about his previous owner? Who was to say he wouldn't grow frustrated and realise that all it took to get compliance was to push a little harder on the point of a single nail.

"No, Daozhang, this one is at fault! This one promised answers and then withheld them, please excuse this humble servant!" San Lang cried. "Daozhang did enter the Gambler's Den

with that piece of human waste. The human made a bet against Hua Cheng, staking both his own life and that of Daozhang. Of course he lost, and so he was dragged away to be dealt with at Crimson Rain's pleasure."

"And what was Hua Chengzhu's pleasure?"

"Daozhang?"

"Only if Crimson Rain has won both of our lives, and I am here in his manor… then…"

"Of course that trash is nowhere near here!" said San Lang as soon as he realised what Xie Lian was getting at. "Daozhang is perfectly safe! Hua Cheng would never pollute his residence with something like that. In fact, Daozhang should never think of him again, because he will never be in a state to be seen again."

Xie Lian breathed out. If nothing else, San Lang seemed very sincere in his assurances of Xie Lian's well-being and in his dislike towards the man. Xie Lian wasn't sure what he could have done to garner such feelings in either San Lang or Hua Cheng, but if they were genuine then all he could be was grateful. Surely someone like him couldn't actually get this lucky? Surely there had to be a catch?

"And do you know what Hua Chengzhu might want with this lowly scrap collector? He won me in a bet, correct? I'm afraid I don't remember very much from that night, so I don't know what was said about me, but I fear I may have been oversold. I don't make much of a prize, certainly not to a lord or a king."

San Lang watched him with inscrutable eyes for a moment, before asking, "Are you scared?"

"A little," he confessed, because there was no point lying. "But I'm thankful to have my wrists unbound and to be given a chance to recover. I'd feel better knowing what Hua Cheng would like from me, and I'll do my best to show gratitude." He had promised, hadn't he? He had a vague memory, amid the pain and confusion, of saying something like that. That he would do whatever was asked of him if only Hua Cheng—

If he only—

Xie Lian's hands shot up to the back of his head. His fingers were met with smooth, unblemished skin beneath the tangled hair. His breathing caught.

"Daozhang?"

"Oh." Tears were welling up again. It really shouldn't be a surprise, he suspected there was a subconscious part of his mind that had already realised this: was he not thinking much more clearly after all? Was he not able to focus on things better? Carry on a conversation? Even sit up without immediate anguish?

But to truly feel it, to feel a whole, healthy scalp beneath his fingers, was a different experience entirely. He was under no illusions that this Ghost King could certainly do

whatever he liked to him, with or without the nail, but the fact that he had taken the time to remove it meant something.

It only took one person to block the rain or raise your from a pit after all.

"Thank— Please pass on my thanks to Hua Chengzhu," he said, voice entirely too emotional.

"No thanks is necessary, the fact that such a thing was ever done is a crime of the highest order. Fixing it was only putting the world back to right. Hua Cheng truly only wants Daozhang to recover and be well, you have no reason to fear him. He will leave you in peace entirely, if you are uncomfortable seeing him. The manor is big and at your disposal, and he will give you all the space you need to feel at ease."

"That's really too generous, for an inconvenience he didn't ask for," said Xie Lian.

"How could Daozhang ever be an inconvenience? If anything, Hua Cheng's household surely owes you more for gracing an unruly place like Ghost City with your presence."

"At this rate, I think we're going to tie ourselves in knots over our thanks and apologies," said Xie Lian, with a weak laugh.

Truly, life took the strangest twists and turns.

"No more thanks then," agreed San Lang. "But I still haven't been able to do anything besides answer a few simple questions. Will Daozhang deny me my purpose?"

"I'm sure San Lang has a greater purpose than indulging me. But if I were to ask for something… a bath?"

Because if he wasn't in immediate danger then that meant that Xie Lian was actually going to have to start performing basic maintenance and that was… overwhelming. When was the last time he had done anything but curl up on the ground or move where he was told or brace himself against whatever new indignity was being done to him? If he wasn't careful, the sheer enormity of what it would take to become human again would overwhelm him, so he needed to approach it in careful steps.

At least he had done this before already, and from much worse states. He had a plan to follow.

The first thing he had done after being freed from the coffin, as a recent example, had been to wash the filth off. Admittedly he had just lain in an empty field while the rain had pounded against his emaciated back, but it had broken down enough of the ground-in filth that he could begin to move his limbs again. It had taken many more baths after that to truly wash it all off, but it had been an important first step. There was something to be said for being clean.

There was something to be said for having a physical thing you could wash away, and hope it took some of the memories with it.

There was something to be said for no longer feeling the tacky residue that still caked his legs and groin beneath his robe.

San Lang seemed perfectly delighted by having been given something he could do. “There’s a bath already drawn! Just through that door there is a bathing chamber, make use of whatever you need.” Then, with a moment’s hesitation, he added, “Would Daozhang like assistance in bathing?”

The little spike of fear was sharp and immediate and startling. The nail being removed really did seem to have brought his emotions too close to the surface, like silt from a lake having been stirred up by an oar. It was unnecessary, because there didn’t seem to be a drop of malice or ill-intent in San Lang, but it still made his mouth dry at the thought of someone being the same room as him without his clothes on, the idea of hands touching his skin, of feeling what he was covered with, of adding more, of—

“No, no, I’m perfectly capable,” said Xie Lian.

San Lang seemed unfazed by the refusal — if he noticed the discomfort in Xie Lian’s tone he made no remark on it. “Then I will go and fetch clean robes for Daozhang while you bathe. The water should still be warmed, but please call if it’s not to your liking or if you need anything else.”

Xie Lian gave his thanks, and finally wiggled his way to the edge of the large bed before standing.

And, like a beloved pet waiting to jump on its master, the vertigo struck.

He had been feeling so comfortable that Xie Lian really had let himself grow complacent. Never in the hut would he have attempted to stand so abruptly, but he had been sitting up without the slightest dizziness and had given it no more thought. But Xie Lian knew how long it took a body to heal, had known it for centuries, since the time had been stabbed over and over on his own divine altar and been left to wait for his body to stitch itself together well enough for him to return to his family.

So the way the room swooped and his stomach twisted in on itself shouldn’t have been a shock. All he could do was lock his muscles and brace his feet and breathe through it, could only wait for it to pass, hope it passed before he fell and wound up at the man’s feet, felt his boot against his ribs as he got angry about his clumsiness, took advantage of him spread out and accessible and—

“Daozhang?” The voice was sharp, concerned, but it wasn't a nail through his ears like it might once have been.

A hand closed around his elbow but it wasn't oppressive, wasn't punishing. The touch was feather-light but unwavering, a blessed anchor in the choppy seas of Xie Lian’s churning gut. He shivered but founded himself letting more and more weight press against the hand; it didn't flinch and it didn’t let him drop.

“Do you feel ill?” the voice fretted.

“Just dizzy from standing,” whispered Xie Lian. “It'll pass. Don’t worry, San Lang.”

"Would you like to sit?"

Would he? Not once during any of these spells had he ever been given such a choice. He had always been commanded or moved as the man had seen fit, and then it had just been a matter of whether he was capable of obeying or if he would fail and be punished. Would it feel better to sit?

It would. But somehow staying still right now was impossible. He felt hunted, even in this calm, undemanding room, standing next to the calm, undemanding San Lang. If he didn't keep moving forward, somehow it felt as if he might drop into an abyss waiting behind him.

"I'm fine, I feel better. I just stood too fast, really. It was my fault."

San Lang didn't seem satisfied by this, but he didn't attempt to follow when Xie Lian stepped away. Xie Lian shot him a reassuring smile, and then turned his entire attention to walking to the bathing chamber's door while he took better stock of his situation.

Standing, apparently, was very different than sitting. That was good to know. More information. Even after taking a moment to lean against San Lang and letting the nausea settle, it didn't go away completely as it had in the bed. It was like every part of his body knew he was too high up and was waiting for a fall. Glimpses at the floor were dizzying, but not looking at it made him feel disconnected from his feet. Everything in the room seemed like it wanted to tilt out from under him. But he breathed, and stepped forward. Stepped again. Slow and steady and firm, not taking his next step until he was sure his foot was flat and secure.

It was in this way that he made it to the bathing room and was able to close the door gratefully behind him. Even as pleasant as San Lang was, there was something to be said for being in a room unobserved.

Well, mostly unobserved. A butterfly had drifted behind him, for the world as if it were just lazily following an air current. Xie Lian gave it a rather unimpressed look, and told it to stay behind the screen that was set up in front of the ornate tub. And it did, fluttering meekly onto a low shelf, appropriately chastised.

Shaking his head, Xie Lian reached out and let his hand trail over the wall, the shelf, the privacy screen, to help him keep his balance now that he wasn't being quite so closely observed. Walking with a point of contact was easier than walking without, more important information.

Much like the bedroom, this was a beautifully decorated room. The bath was an engraved tub of copper, and must have some sort of magic worked into it because it was steaming lightly. Different jars and basins were arranged on tiered tables along the edge, soft stacks of towels were placed just below that, and along the walls were pots of humidity-loving flowers, giving the room a subtly perfumed scent. It was so distant from the agonizing over-stimulation he had been in before this that it made his entire time in the Gambling Den feel vaguely unreal. Like a bad dream.

But nothing about that had been a dream. He knew it by the pain that still radiated along his body and by how he felt his muscles tensed when he even just rested his hands against the belt of his robe.

He did not want to take it off.

Not that having it on had ever helped him. It wasn't like it had even been possible to take the robe off before, not fully at least, not with his hands bound behind his back. But he didn't like the idea of being the one to loosen the belt, to expose himself willingly to a large, scrutinizing room.

Xie Lian sighed and shook his head. "Scrutinizing", as if the tiles were watching him. The only eyes in this room belonged to a butterfly which had stayed obediently out of sight, and his own which had been reflected back at him from a bronze mirror hung from one wall.

As with anything painful or humiliating, it was generally better to just do it quickly and own the action; he yanked the worn, fabric sash away and let the robe puddle on the floor.

The chill was immediate even in the steamy room, and Xie Lian did not bother feeling ashamed of his ungainly scurry into the warm bath.

This made it worth it.

Xie Lian groaned and sunk down to his chin. This might have even been worth the nail. It was certainly worth the migraine he had gotten in Ghost City. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a bath this warm, never mind in a tub in which he could submerge his whole body. His baths were generally in convenient bodies of water, or else in shallow hip baths that could occasionally be paid for at inns. This bath seemed determined to eke out every ache and pain that had resided in his body for the past several centuries and disperse it in sweet smelling steam.

For a while he just sat there, luxuriating, unhurried because the water didn't seem inclined to cool. It was only after he began to feel bad about leaving San Lang completely alone that he began to experiment with the various supplies left at the side of the bath. He found several jars of powdered bath beans, each mixed with a different arrangement of spices going by the smell. He found the coarsest of them and took a handful, hoping the abrasiveness of the soap would help scrub the worst of filth away. Fortunately it seemed the enchantments weren't limited to warming, because no matter how much he scrubbed the water never seemed to muddy.

Gradually Xie Lian moved on to a finer soap, and continued to scrub until his skin grew pink, and scrubbed some more after that. His skin was growing raw under the ministration, but he was loathe to stop until he knew he was clean. Surely a little more. A little more.

And the more he cleaned his arms, his back, his legs, his feet, the less he had to think about the last two points of his body that would inevitably need attention.

One was his hair.

Xie Lian was reluctant to even try ducking his head. He felt certain the dense knots and grease would just repel the water entirely.

The other was between his thighs.

Xie Lian leaned his head back against the curved edge of the tub, staring up at the ceiling. Even that was decorated with handsome, dark beams. Someone had put a lot of time and effort into these rooms.

With his eyes locked on the ceiling, he let one hand lower between his legs. He felt the muscles in his stomach contract before he had done more than stir the water currents.

He was going to be sick.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the steam.

It had to be done. If the rest of Xie Lian's body could be called filthy, it had nothing on this. What still clung to him — within him — was unspeakable. It was already a sin that he had lain in that beautiful bed while in such a state. He would feel better when this chore was done, when he had fully exorcised that man from his body, and yet.

And yet he felt… something. Wrung out. Not fear, almost anger if he allowed it. But he knew down what path that led, and he would not go there. No matter what abyss he was cast in, he would not let his own anger try to claw others down into it with him. He simply had to push forward, so he kept his eyes on the ceiling and began to recite the ethics sutras to himself.

He grasped the flesh between his legs as clinically as he could, touching only as much as he needed to ensure cleanliness. The entire time he feared it would respond. That it would stiffen, and refuse to go down until he had torn another unwilling release from it. Only this time it would be from his owns hands instead of those of another.

It did not, and he did not. He cleaned it without incident.

What he cleaned next was somehow even worse. The moment he let his fingers press against that spot, worn so raw and sore, he felt something within his own mind begin to drip away, like beads of bathwater down his back, pooling away, dispersing into the tub. He was losing something.

He was still in the room, still in the water, but he was three steps away from his own body. There was nothing he could do but endure, so he waited, separate from sensation, separate from feeling, separate from thought. The steam almost mimicked how his vision had once been, hazy and vague. He often got hazy and vague, just before the act, because it was better than when things were crisp. If he just leaned into it, let his mind continue to drip away, then he might not even remember what would come next.

Nothing came next. Xie Lian's own hand hovered against his thigh and that was it.

Nothing would happen if he didn't do it.

He didn't want to do it. He wanted to return to that gentle bed and close his eyes and not get out again.

He had to be clean. Like relocating a joint, it simply had to be done, and no one could do it but himself.

He cleaned himself.

He wasn't entirely sure how, only that it must have happened because when he came more fully back to himself he felt chilled and shaky, even in the water. Bits of time popped like the bubbles floating in the tub, and he didn't try chasing them. It was enough that he had done what had to be done. No one said he had to think about it.

The bath was no longer appealing and he no longer wanted to be there. The water must be polluted now, no matter what enchantments were on the tub. He didn't even bother attempting to tackle his hair — it was a lost cause, better to just cut it off and start fresh. He could ask San Lang to bring him some shears, surely.

With that thought in mind, he rose to dry himself and dress.

And, heat from the bath rushing to his already dizzy head, Xie Lian immediately blacked out.

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Chapter End Notes

PART ONE

Xie Lian gets injured during a confrontation with a mortal and it ends with a nail being driven through the back of his skull. Though his body still tries to heal around it, he's left disoriented and weak, struggling to think clearly or even move his body. The man who did this takes advantage of Xie Lian's incapacitated state and keeps him for himself. During this time Xie Lian is underfed, beaten, and raped, though the descriptions are generally rather abstract.

Eventually the man becomes nervous about having a "demon" in his home and fears Xie Lian might break free and try to enact vengeance. So, to get rid of him, the man attempts to gamble him away in Ghost City.

Hua Cheng is enormously unimpressed by this.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

jeez guys I hope y'all are really interested in some recovery because this is going to end up being about quadruple the length of the original fic OTL why is it so easy to break things and so much harder to fix them after???

also, important note: I know this is the recovery side of things but I'm not being coy with any of those tags, there will definitely be flashbacks and discussion about what happened to Xie Lian that will probably get more explicit than part one did. If you don't like fics that depict rape or violence, approach with caution! be safe!

He had tried to run away once.

Well, not run. That ability, like so many others, had been torn from him by the entry of the nail. Any sort of movement was hard, like trying to organise the mobilisation of armies rather than the simple contraction of muscles. Did anyone realise how much thought went into the every little movement of one's body?

But he had tried to flee.

Even with the nail in his head and Ruoye binding his arms, surely if he could just get away there would be someone willing to help him eventually.

He had made it to the door, but the latch had been hard to manage without hands. He had only just gotten it open, had just tripped and fallen outside the hut as the door swung away from him, before the man had woken and found him no longer sharing his sleeping mat.

He had hit Xie Lian over the head with a metal kettle.

An entire half of his vision had disappeared and sharp, fiery pain had radiated between the bloody gash torn into his temple and the nail at the back. He remembered the coppery taste in his mouth as his head bled and the way he had been hauled back into the hut. He had squirmed, not even sure if he was fighting or if it was just his misfiring brain trying to find an outlet for the agony it was experiencing, but the man had had his own opinions. Hands had gripped his shoulders, pressed his back flat, and a face had wavered in and out of the pinpricked half-vision that currently made up Xie Lian's world.

His legs had been rucked up around the man's hips, and he had been dragged backwards. The man hadn't even been hard, he had been too angry for that, but he had kept one hand on Xie Lian's shoulder and dug his other into the dent on his temple, fingers clawing the fresh

blood. He used that to stroke himself into hardness, and Xie Lian had been able to do nothing but lie there, knocked mostly senseless to all but the disgust he felt.

He had done nothing but lie still, while his head bled and a hand held his shoulder and another pressed a blood-slicked rod of flesh into him.

He was lying there while his head bled and a hand held his shoulder.

He was lying there while his head bled and a hand held his shoulder, except this time he wasn't still. His head hurt, he was stunned, but his hands twisted against a damp floor which meant they weren't bound and his legs twitched with more ease than he was used to.

The man spoke above him and the hands on his shoulders tightened, trying to tug him upwards, but this time Xie Lian moved.

He kicked out with all the force he could manage.

There was an *oof* and then suddenly the hands were gone.

Xie Lian scrambled desperately to his knees, and there was white flying in his face which he attempted to swat away. He was shaking and his mouth was filled with copper (was filled with a bitterness, was—) and he couldn't see from one eye because blood was coating that side of his face and—

And he was not in a hut. The weight on him was not a robe that had been half-pushed off but a towel that seemed to have been half-wrapped around him before he had woken. He was in a bathing chamber. It smelt of flowers and oils but the smells now were too strong, too overwhelming, and he just wanted to curl and gag and shut his eyes against the butterflies that were darting around his vision and trying to land on him.

He didn't want them to touch him, he didn't want anything to touch him!

"Stop!" he said. Yelled. He yelled it. His voice cracked, but it was too much and he was too confused and everything looked wrong, smelt wrong, was trying to touch him, touch his naked skin, and he was bleeding.

The butterflies vanished.

He shivered on the floor. When had it gotten so cold? Nothing else moved. There was no sound.

He couldn't say how much time passed. It felt stretched and slow and awkward as more and more awareness came back to him, as he realised he was far, far away from that hut and that man.

"San Lang?" he said eventually, because he now knew whose hands those must have been. It almost made his gut twist to think of San Lang grabbing him like that, while he was naked and unconscious on the ground. He had fallen, hadn't he? He would have been sprawled and available and— and of course that wasn't what San Lang had been doing. He'd had his hands

on Xie Lian's shoulders to try to pull him up off the ground. He had been wrapping a towel around him. Covering him, shielding him.

"I'm here, Daozhang," came a very meek voice from somewhere behind him. "I'm sorry. Are you alright? Would you like this one to leave?"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, he pushed himself into a sitting position and wrapped the large towel more fully around himself. San Lang lay flat on the ground, where Xie Lian had obviously kicked him. He looked winded, but mostly contrite, not even willing to move himself from the place he had been tossed. Whether it was out of deference or concern about scaring Xie Lian into more violence, he couldn't say.

"You don't need to apologise," said Xie Lian, and almost believed it. "You heard me fall and came to help, didn't you?"

"...Yes."

"I must have hit my head, I didn't know what was happening — I overreacted."

"You did hit your head," San Lang confirmed, his gaze intense from his spot on the floor.

"I think I must have also hit San Lang," he added, sheepish and apologetic.

"It was this one's fault for grabbing without asking. You should never tolerate anyone's presence who isn't wanted."

Which, of course, was why San Lang was giving him so many options to get rid of him.

Instead of doing that, Xie Lian said, "Would you mind helping me up? I'm not sure I can do it without falling again. I think I've probably made a big enough fool of myself already."

"Daozhang could never look like a fool," San Lang declared loyally as he walked carefully over to do as Xie Lian asked.

"Not even after knocking myself unconscious from slipping in the bath and kicking a generous person who came to help me across the room?" Xie Lian asked. His skin crawled a bit at the touch, but it helped that San Lang hadn't grabbed this time, had only held out a hand and waited for Xie Lian to grasp it.

"A show of martial prowess isn't foolish," said San Lang. "I am honoured to bear witness."

"And bear the bruises?"

There was a curl of humour in the youth's voice. "Those as well."

Xie Lian chuckled, a weak sound in his chest, like a bird that had been caged so long it had forgotten it had wings. "You really are so insincere!"

"I assure Daozhang that I am the most sincere person there is!"

Once Xie Lian was on his feet and felt somewhat steady, even with the new, throbbing ache on his temple, he hobbled behind the privacy screen to change into the new robes San Lang had brought him. He was slightly stunned by what he found, though perhaps he shouldn't have been. The robes were simply adorned, but in a way that spoke of good-taste rather than frugality. Like Xie Lian's own robes, they were done in white, but there was cream and gold embroidery along the neckline and sleeves that was so delicate you would hardly notice it if you weren't looking directly at it. The sleeves were generous, and the whole thing had a satisfying weight — and that was only the outermost layer.

"Hua Chengzhu is really too generous," he said weakly as he felt the soft under-robes which were of a better quality than his old outer robes had ever been.

"Hua Cheng wants Daozhang's comfort," San Lang repeated without hesitation.

Xie Lian had intended to let this strange little ruse carry on until his host was tired of it — it had seemed courteous to play along — but the whole thing was just too ludicrous not to say anything. And really, his head hurt too much for subterfuge.

"Even when he kicks Hua Chengzhu across his own bathing chamber?"

There was silence on the other side of the privacy screen which gave Xie Lian a moment to corral his headache and sort out all the layers before him. After being in a single, scant robe for so long, it felt not just nice but safe to be tucked away so securely beneath layer after layer of fabric. He pulled them tight and belted them snuggly with trembling, awkward fingers, finally emerging when he felt somewhat human.

San Lang, which was to say Hua Cheng, was standing where he had been left, watching Xie Lian with a wary look. As if Xie Lian was the one in this room that was at all threatening rather than the one leaning pitifully against a washing stand.

"Daozhang," he said eventually, head dropping in contrition, "this one apologises for not being forthright…"

"It's fine! Hua Chengzhu can of course be called whatever he likes in his own home, surely?"

Hua Cheng glanced up through his hair, looking bolstered by the light, teasing tone Xie Lian was using. When no further rebuke seemed forthcoming, he straightened, a hint of playful mischief creeping into his voice.. "In that case, this one really does prefer San Lang."

Xie Lian felt a little curl of mischief in his own chest. It was startling and very warm and he couldn't help but grab it with both hands. When was the last time he had felt an urge to play with anyone?

"In that case, allow me to borrow San Lang's memory again. Back in the gambling hall, did San Lang not call this one gege? If we're voicing preferences, I believe I prefer that over daozhang. …Or, if that's too forward, my name is Xie Lian. You could call me by that."

It was a calculated risk and it paid off. Hua Cheng's boyish face lit up, like he had just been given a wonderful gift instead of being lightly teased for using such a silly name in the heat

of a crisis. "En! Of course! Whatever gege prefers, this San Lang will certainly call him that! Though, if gege wouldn't mind me asking, when did you know I was Hua Cheng?"

"Mm? Oh, since you healed the butterfly."

Hua Cheng blinked. "So long? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. Only you mentioned that you knew I had swatted the butterfly because it had landed on me. But since that had happened before you entered the room, it only made sense that you were able to see into the room somehow. The butterflies were strange enough to be a spiritual creature, so that would be a sensible way to watch a room you weren't in and an easy way to see when I swatted one of them. So if San Lang were able to see through the butterflies, that would make them San Lang's spiritual creatures. After healing the butterfly, you mentioned that they belonged to the lord of the manor. What else could that mean, other than the fact that San Lang was the manor lord and therefore Hua Chengzhu?"

Rather than being upset about his disguise being blown, Hua Cheng seemed positively delighted by this.

Xie Lian managed to leave the bathing chamber without further incident after that, and sunk gratefully back onto the bed. He really was exhausted. He had been exhausted before even going to the bath, wrung out by the simple complexities of carrying on a conversation and trying to make sense of new surroundings, but now after all that excitement he really didn't have a single drop of energy to spare.

"Would gege like some tea now?" Hua Cheng asked, though from several paces away from the bed. "Or something to eat?"

"It seems to me like it's San Lang who really wants tea," remarked Xie Lian. "You should have some, if it's still warm."

"En, it's still warm. But gege, don't you want to eat something?"

Ah, he probably should. He hadn't eaten in… a while. It was hard to know, since he wasn't actually sure how much time had passed between the Gambling Den and waking up in this room. But he hadn't eaten anything the night before, the man had been— after the cultivator left, he had wanted—

Xie Lian hadn't eaten.

But he had been given a plate to lick clean before the cultivator had arrived. Vaguely Xie Lian knew this wasn't something he should share, that being forced face down to lick a plate like a dog was something shameful, but at the time he had just been grateful for the calories he had been able to get.

In any case, he wasn't hungry now. The stress of the day had shrunk his stomach down to a fist, and the pain in his head was filling it with a familiar nausea. It was easy not to be hungry when you felt you'd surely throw it all up if you ate.

"Maybe later. I want to sleep first. If that's alright." As if he hadn't just woken up. Not to say that usually stopped him. There hadn't been much to do in the hut besides sleep, when the man wasn't making use of him, and he didn't seem to have the energy to act any differently now.

Hua Cheng didn't seem terribly happy about this response.

"May this one at least tend to your head? If you don't want the butterflies near you, I could clean it with a cloth? Or provide you with the cloth, if you prefer?"

"The butterflies heal? I assumed they just…"

"Spied for me?"

"Kept Hua Chengzhu informed," said Xie Lian with a bit more tact.

"They can serve many purposes, like any good tool. I can see through their eyes, and they can act as weapons, but they can also heal. …When I removed the nail, they helped heal gege's head."

"I remember seeing them all around my head," Xie Lian suddenly recalled.

"En. If you let one or two near you now, they could do that again."

"I see." The nausea was swirling into something thicker and darker, filling his already shrunken stomach with something like guilt. "So the one that had landed on my head — the one I hit — it had been trying to check on the nail wound, wasn't it?" When Hua Cheng didn't answer, Xie Lian continued, unable to meet his eyes. "It was trying to help me, and I hit it, just like that…"

"It's fine, gege," Hua Cheng said gently, and just like that a butterfly peeled away from the vambrace and fluttered over, hovering politely in the air until Xie Lian held out a finger for it to land on. Instead of reassuring him, Xie Lian just felt tears prickling once more into his eyes, as hot as the blood.

"It's not fair," he said, more to the butterfly than Hua Cheng, at whom he still couldn't stand to look. He feared seeing an expression of pity or compassion which he certainly didn't deserve. "It's not fair for them to get hurt when they were just trying to help. I hit the butterfly, I kicked you… I'm sorry. I don't…"

"Fair has nothing to do with it," said Hua Cheng firmly. "Gege experienced something horrible. If someone intends to stay close to someone who was hurt, they shouldn't be surprised if they're accidentally struck in return. It's a trivial thing, it wasn't meant cruelly. Anyone who can't see that, doesn't deserve to stick around. I'm not injured, and neither is the butterfly, so what does it matter? It was us who acted rashly and put gege in a position to fear us."

"So just because I was hurt, I should hurt other people? I should get revenge?" The words were more caustic than he had intended, but the grating fragments of his memories were

letting something old be unearthed, another voice sharing an oh-too-familiar sentiment.

"Did gege kick me out of revenge? If so, I'll gladly subject myself to it, but I don't think it was intended as such."

"Of course not! You've been nothing but generous!"

"Then it was an accident. You were scared, and hurt, and you reacted. Why make it more than it is? But if gege wishes to make amends, he could allow the butterflies to see to his head now?"

In the face of Hua Cheng's unrelenting reasonableness, Xie Lian had no choice but to give up his agitation. He let his shoulders slump — already a new wave of tiredness was washing over him, just from holding that little bit of tension — and he nodded. Hua Cheng smiled at him, so for now it would work as penance, he supposed. Even if it did feel like a rather selfish penance.

Hua Cheng encouraged him to lie down comfortably before letting two additional butterflies peel away from his vambrace and fly over to Xie Lian. They seemed to be doing their best to be utterly polite, because they landed only after Xie Lian nodded to them, and they walked across his forehead on delicate feet, never getting too close to his eyes.

"You said they can also be weapons? I can't imagine that," he said, for the sake of something to say. "They're too cute."

Hua Cheng gave him a smile that was mostly teeth. "Most people can't imagine them as anything else."

That should have been intimidating, but somehow it had the opposite effect on Xie Lian. There had been abundant opportunities for Hua Cheng to hurt him if he had wanted, and he had not acted on a single one. In fact, he seemed ready not just to pull the sword from Xie Lian's chest but to then throw himself upon it if he thought for one moment he had made Xie Lian uncomfortable in some way. Knowing that a person like that also had the power to keep anyone away that Xie Lian didn't want to see was a surprisingly reassuring thought.

It helped him truly believe that whatever had happened to the man, he really would never see him again.

It was that thought, the delicate press of tiny feet, and Hua Cheng's face that eventually lulled Xie Lian back to sleep.

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It was dark. The man was there. Xie Lian wasn't sure when this had happened.

The man often came home late in the evening, angry at the work he lacked, angry at the work he got, just angry. Xie Lian was there to receive that anger. Sometimes from fists. Sometimes not.

A rope would be tied around his neck when the man left, the trailing end knotted to the foot of a heavy wardrobe. He could pull as much as he liked without ever shifting it. He could kick at the walls as much as he liked, and he had never succeeded in drawing anyone over to help. A second rope, thick and coated with tar for hauling bricks at a worksite, would be pressed between his teeth.

Sometimes the man came back and didn't even bother untying Xie Lian. It would just be dark like night, dark like tar, and then there would be boots on the floor and force against his skin, and movement and movement and movement, movement that changed depending on the nature of the force. Kicks and blows did one thing. The man throwing himself to the floor and shoving himself into Xie Lian, sharp and unprepared, was another.

He would wind up jerking and twisting and scrambling uselessly, trying to find purchase on the floor to stop his mind from breaking into pieces and disappearing in the shadows, to stop himself from becoming a coalescence of darkness rather than a person. He would get tangled in the ropes.

He was tangled in the ropes.

He was choking and twisting but he was held down and it was going to be the other sort of force, hands on him, robe shoved up, it shoved in, and then—

Xie Lian woke as he tried to spit out a tar-covered rope that didn't exist. He was still tangled and knotted, still held down, and he was panicking, panicking, trying not to get lost in the night, except…

Except he could see. The shadows weren't smudged and all-consuming. His vision was crisp and clear. It was still dark, but moonlight filtered in through a paper window screen, and he could see the details of the bed he was lying in, the ornamentation on the walls, even the handle on the door across the room.

The nail had made focusing on anything painful, and at night it was an impossibility.

Xie Lian stilled his body, forced the locked, fighting muscles to ease, and assessed where he was.

He was in the big, impossibly soft bed in Paradise Manor. Hua Cheng's home, under Hua Cheng's protection. The man wasn't here and never would be here.

There were no ropes, not in his mouth or around his neck or binding his arms. Instead he had fallen asleep in those new, many-layered robes that Hua Cheng had given him, and in his sleep he had managed to get himself all tangled up.

Xie Lian knew nightmares and fears intimately. He has walked hand in hand with them for centuries. He knew they came but would also eventually fade, like robes worn to tatters. He could stand on a mountain ledge with hardly a thought of the war these days. He went years without expecting to turn and see White No-Face stalking him. And though he still found himself uncomfortable in tight spaces he no longer thought he felt the coffin's splinters under his fingernails.

He knew irrational fears. It was just something to endure until it passed, though he doubted he would be getting any more sleep tonight.

He sat slowly, giving his head time to adjust to the change in height, and carefully unwound the sleeves and straightened his robes until he no longer felt like he was being suffocated. The irrational fears had faded into this gentle darkness, so different from the darkness of the hut.

One difference was the soft glow that had started by the table but was growing closer as two butterflies drifted through the darkness towards him. He sighed and held out a hand for them. One landed on his fingers while the other perched on his blanket-covered lap.

"You're not going to tell San Lang I'm awake, are you?" he asked the butterfly.

It said nothing, just fluttered its wings. He realised what a ridiculous question it was even as he said it. Based on the little he knew of his host, Hua Cheng seemed entirely too preoccupied with his comfort and safety to have disappeared entirely after such a harrowing afternoon. For a Ghost King, this was clearly someone with too much time on his hands.

"San Lang, if you're there you should just come in. It can't be comfortable in a draughty hall."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then the door slid open and Hua Cheng entered. Xie Lian did his best to cast him a scolding look, rather than let the naked relief of knowing that his door had been guarded show on his face.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" he demanded.

"I'm a ghost, gege, I don't need to sleep."

"I feel like even a ghost would get cranky without sleep."

"I'm never cranky."

Xie Lian raised a brow. "Oh? And if I ask anyone else that?"

"You don't trust this San Lang?" Hua Cheng said instead of answering. He had sat down at the table across the room and was low enough that he could look up at Xie Lian through his eyelashes, the picture of innocence.

Xie Lian shook his head. Truly, this was a shameless ghost! He feared asking whether Hua Cheng had been outside his door because the butterflies had alerted him to Xie Lian's distress and he had arrived in case of trouble, or if he had been the entire afternoon and evening that Xie Lian had slept. He didn't really want to think what he would prefer the answer to be either.

"So, what does a Ghost King do all night when he's not sleeping or seeing to the well-being of guests?" Xie Lian asked because he was awake now and they might as well chat.

"Oh, this and that. I mess around. Surely gege has heard the stories of what Crimson Rain Sought Flower gets up to?"

"Ah, sorry, I haven't," said Xie Lian, settling back against the pillows. The butterflies shifted and found more comfortable places to land, keeping the bed bathed in an artificial moonlight. "Will you tell me about it?"

"You don't want to go back to sleep? I wouldn't want to keep you awake with my own restlessness."

"I think I've slept all I can." It wasn't even a lie. He was feeling disoriented from nightmares and from sleeping at the wrong time of the day. If his host wasn't sleeping anyway, then Xie Lian was not above monopolising his time a bit more.

"In that case, we could discuss it over tea?"

The bid to get Xie Lian to eat was so unsubtle that Xie Lian had to give in. He probably should put something in his stomach in any case — he knew that half of the nausea he felt right now was probably hunger and would get better once he had forced something down. So, to San Lang's evident relief, they both ended up at the table with a cloud of butterflies overhead to cast the room in some light. The tea pot had long since been removed, since even its charm was not capable of keeping tea warm and palatable for that long, but Hua Cheng assured him he had called for more.

"So, what stories about Crimson Rain Sought Flower should I have heard?" Xie Lian asked once they were settled.

Hua Cheng leaned on the table and tapped his chin as if in thought. "Would you like to hear about how I received my title?"

"It's quite evocative imagery," Xie Lian agreed. "It seems rather pretty for a powerful ghost."

"I can summon down a bloody rain when it suits my mood, and back when I was just starting out I did so while clearing out a nuisance ghost lair. There were flowers there that I fancied, so I blocked them from the rain. So of course someone saw that and the name has stuck ever since. After that, every Calamity has been given or taken a coloured name."

"So San Lang is a trend-setter it seems. Are there many Calamities?"

"No, not many. There have only ever been three and a make-weight with delusions. Myself, Black Water Sinks Ships, Night-Touring Green Lantern — gege can forget that name immediately, it's worthless — and the White-Clothed Calamity."

A low dread stirred, right down at Xie Lian's toes, and began to rise like a chill. It wasn't that he had never heard Bai Wuxiang referred to before, of course, mortals had stories about him as much as any nefarious ghost and for the first couple centuries after his banishment. The name got dredged up from time to time and he really had become quite indifferent to it. Bai Wuxiang had been dealt with long ago after all and had shown no sign of returning in any

century since. And yet it felt inauspicious to hear that name now, in this dark room, when Xie Lian couldn't even walk in a straight line.

There was no point letting himself get worked though. He knew he was just on edge from his nightmare and the draining day that had come before. It wasn't as if some ancient calamity was about to come knocking just because someone had said his name in passing.

Xie Lian's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

He had only just managed to get his heart under control when Hua Cheng called for entry, and then suddenly there was a figure in a white mask stepping in and Xie Lian was abruptly on his feet.

And then, of course, his knees were giving out. He certainly would have struck the floor if Hua Cheng hadn't just as quickly leapt across the table and caught him by the elbows. What should have been a comforting touch became just as warped as the one in the bathing chamber though in an entirely different way, because this time it seemed as if Crimson Rain Sought Flower had been aware of the White-Clothed Calamity, could have been in league the entire time, had perhaps intentionally acquired Xie Lian specifically so—

"Apologies if I startled you," said the white-masked man, tipping immediately into a bow.

He stayed low, neck bare, while Xie Lian stared.

The voice was entirely wrong. In truth, everything had been wrong. The hair, the black robes, the physique, even the mask itself looked nothing like Bai Wuxiang's laughing-crying mask. Xie Lian's heart was gradually slowing, and he sank a bit more heavily back into the arm supporting him. Above him he could feel Hua Cheng watching him, as if to assess whether he was about to faint or lash out.

"It's fine," Xie Lian said weakly. "I'm a little out of sorts."

Only then did the masked man lift his head. In his hands, which Xie Lian had not noticed until now, was a tray carrying a teapot, cups, and a frankly ridiculous arrangement of food.

"It seems like my insomnia has dragged you out of your bed," Xie Lian said apologetically as the man placed the tray on the table.

"Don't worry about Yin Yu, it's his job," said Hua Cheng dismissively as he helped Xie Lian sit back at the table.

"I'm happy to help," the man called Yin Yu agreed.

"Here, gege, try some of this…"

And so Xie Lian slowly calmed as he let Hua Cheng fill his plate with whatever he thought Xie Lian should eat next. He ate slowly, because Xie Lian had starved enough time over the years to know how to reintroduce food to his body, and drank plenty. After the first few unpleasant bites in which his stomach tried to remember what to do with it, it was the most delicious meal he had eaten in a long time. It just felt nice to hold his own chopsticks again

and to be able to pick and choose what he ate. Everything was warm and fresh and enticing. Good company didn't hurt either.

"So now I know that Crimson Rain cares for flowers," said Xie Lian, trying to smooth the waters between them a little. "Is that all flowers, or were those ones special?"

"Hm," said Hua Cheng as he twirled a cup in his hands, "if I answer this question, will I be able to start asking some of my own?"

"Didn't San Lang promise to answer all my questions and serve as my memory since mine is so poor?" Xie Lian returned.

Hua Cheng pouted. "So mean. Gege deprives this San Lang."

Xie Lian attempted a grinned, willing to engage in a game if it helped the darkness feel less oppressive. He also took the pouting as an opportunity to shove some food onto Hua Cheng's plate — so far it had been mostly Xie Lian eating and he would absolutely not be able to finish all this food. Realistically he probably only had a few more bites in him if he didn't want to risk being sick all over again by overtaxing his stomach.

"If you answer mine, I'll answer yours, though I'm not particularly interesting."

"I have a particular flower I like," said Hua Cheng gamely. "But I like flowers in general. They remind me of someone I care for. This manor has a garden, if you're interested in seeing it."

"Oh! Yes, I would be!"

"And now my question! Hmm…" Xie Lian had a moment to worry that Hua Cheng might ask him about his circumstances, or what had happened for him to wind up in the hands of the man, but that concern was quickly laid to rest. "Does gege prefer jiaozi or baozi?"

Dumplings or steamed buns? What a question!

"Are you trying to feed me more? I can't fit another bite, I mean it!"

"No, no, just curious about what sort of preference gege has," San Lang assured him. "You said you'd answer, you won't deny me now, will you?"

"Well, I prefer steamed buns, I suppose. They're more filling and are easy to carry around and eat later. Do I get another question?"

"En, as many as you like. I promised, didn't I?"

"Then what makes a Ghost King special? Do you all have domains like Ghost City?"

"Black Water and I both have a domain, but Black Water's is a depressing little hovel so it barely counts. A Ghost King is forged inside the cursed mountain Tonglu. We're considered Supreme-ranked ghosts and are a scourge to the Heavens." He said this with a smile, like a schoolboy admitting to pranks.

"What makes San Lang a scourge?"

"Ah! My turn! Does gege like to read?"

"Mm, yes, I suppose so. Honestly, I only read what I had to as a youth. I much preferred being active to studying, so while I was expected to be well-read, I really didn't do more than I had to. I think I would enjoy reading more now, but I don't really live a life conducive to it. Does San Lang like to read?"

"Are you trying to slip in two questions, gege? This Ghost King needs to stay on his toes or I'll be made a fool of."

Based off the scraps of memory that Xie Lian had of the Gambler's Den, he rather doubted that anyone ever made a fool of Hua Cheng.

Still, San Lang answered, "I do like to read, and if gege is interested I can bring you to my library later. Or bring you some things to read if you prefer to rest here. And I burnt down the temples of thirty-three gods."

He said the last bit like afterthought that was much less interesting than Xie Lian's potential literary interests. Xie Lian choked — he was shocked that even he had missed hearing something like this!

"Why did you burn down thirty-three temples?"

"Gege misunderstands, I burnt *all* the temples for those thirty-three gods. And it's my turn." Xie Lian weakly waved Hua Cheng on. "Hm… does gege have a favourite colour?"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry — were they children making friends? It seemed like it! A Laughingstock of Three Realms and a Ghost King! Still, Hua Cheng was answering much more serious questions from Xie Lian, so the least he could do was give these ridiculous questions some thought. Gold, he supposed, was his obvious answer. Gold had been valued highly in Xianle and it was a colour that now reminded him of home and childhood, one he didn't see that often in his day to day life anymore. But it felt rather melancholic and distant, even in a room now draped in soft creams and warm golds. If not gold, he could say white he supposed, it was what he tended to wear, but his cultivation robes had always been white and he had never felt any urge to change that. Did he have a different colour he preferred?

He found himself thinking of the red lanterns of Ghost City, the red columns of the Gambler's Den, Hua Cheng's red robes when Xie Lian had been half out of his mind and being carried to safety. At the time the colour had been intense, overwhelming, simply too much, but it also meant it had stuck with him. Even when other memories slid away or warped, the red stayed true.

That red sat across from him now, asking him silly questions and feeding him and keeping his nightmares at bay.

He found himself saying "Red," without bothering to give it any more thought. Why overthink it? If he liked it, he liked it.

Hua Cheng seemed intrigued by this, but Xie Lian prompted him with his previous question before he could try digging into his answer.

"I challenged thirty-five but only thirty-three of them accepted; the other two cowards slunk away. If they won, I would have relinquish my ashes to them to do with as they pleased, and if I won they were sworn to step down from Heaven. Each lost and each refused to honour their agreement, so I burnt their temples to the ground, and any new temple that was built in their name."

That was certainly something. Without temples it was almost impossible to keep a follower base, and without that it was all but a guaranteed death for a god, but Xie Lian found he couldn't really fault Hua Cheng. He had offered the challenge and the terms and they had chosen to accept, and if they had won they certainly would have scattered Hua Cheng's ashes.

Or used them to control him. Xie Lian knew exactly what could happen to a person who was controlled entirely.

"That was a big risk," Xie Lian said. "They could have done anything to you."

"Only if they had won, gege," said Hua Cheng, in a tone that made it clear he'd had no doubts about the outcome of his challenges.

"Still, what made you want to take such a chance? There must have been a reason, thirty-three — or thirty-five — is a very specific number and the gamble was high!"

"Maybe I didn't like their faces," said Hua Cheng lazily. "But it's my question again."

Xie Lian sighed. Hua Cheng knew how to keep a person on tenterhooks.

He expected another frivolous question, but what he got instead this time was, "Would gege like to wash his hair?"

Xie Lian startled. He had completely forgotten about that. "Ah… it's quite a mess, isn't it?"

"You were interrupted while bathing, it only makes sense you didn't have a chance to finish."

"No, no, I was actually done. Honestly, I've given up on it. There's really no way I'll be able to get it clean or get the knots out, it's a lost cause. I was going to ask you for something to cut it with."

Hua Cheng sat up straighter, looking shocked. "You want to cut it?"

"It's not so much a want as a must…"

"Then if gege has no preference, would he allow this one to attempt to wash it before he cuts it?"

Hua Cheng seemed so adamant, but the very thought of it was horrifying. It wasn't even the thought of being touched that turned his stomach, because he really didn't feel he had any reason to fear Hua Cheng near him, but he knew what made those knots. He knew what glued the strands together, what had soaked into his hair and drawn it into the wretched clumps it now hung in.

The thought of Hua Cheng's pale, handsome hands coming anywhere near it was intolerable.

"No! No, you really can't! That's absolutely— no! It's dirty, San Lang, it would be better just to cut!"

"If it's dirty, that's why it should be washed," said Hua Cheng, once more frustratingly reasonable. "I don't mind if it's difficult, this one would welcome the challenge. It would be the greatest honour."

"It—" He couldn't say it. He really couldn't say it. "It would take so long, San Lang…"

"It would take longer to grow back," he said fiercely. "And you can get as comfortable as you need. You could have a nap, since I don't need to sleep anyway — it would give me something to do. Gege must know that it's good to keep Ghost Kings busy and out of trouble."

Hua Cheng was so eager. That was no surprise, he had been so terribly eager at every opportunity to be of help so far, both when he was pretending to be a servant and after Xie Lian had acknowledged his true title. But surely he couldn't allow this? He needed to say something.

He would definitely throw up all the delicious food he had eaten if he said anything.

He couldn't let Hua Cheng touch his hair but he didn't think he could turn him down.

What would Hua Cheng do if he knew the extent of the filth he had brought into his home? Suddenly the thought of Hua Cheng's gentle expressions turning to ones of disgust were overwhelming.

It was always better to face pain in a straightforward manner and push past it. Better to do it quick. Set the bone, and let it heal. Even if he was disgusted, San Lang would certainly let him leave this place unharmed, and Xie Lian would still be in a better spot than he had been even two nights ago. It would be fine.

He couldn't let Hua Cheng touch his hair.

"Does San Lang know what— when I—" He had to stop, stop the rising panic. Memories were coming fast and thick and disconnected. What could he even say, how could he define this, which of these broken, horrible bits of himself should he pluck out and lay out in the open for Hua Cheng to witness?

A hand reached out and a single finger touched the side of his wrist. The offer of comfort, ready to pull back at the slightest sign that Xie Lian wouldn't welcome it. Before he knew

what he was doing, his hands were clenched around Hua Cheng's proffered one. His were shaking, but Hua Cheng's were reassuringly cold and steady. Not hot, not sweaty, not demanding. Just there. He should let go, but he felt now that if he did he might crumble apart into all these fractured little memories and have nothing left of himself that was whole.

"Do you know what I— what was done while I was with— when he had me?"

Hua Cheng gave him the courtesy of answering plainly. "Some. The croupier at that table recounted what was said that night. That's all I know."

Xie Lian tried to remember what had been said. All he remembered about the gambling table was being on his knees, being so so grateful for the dark and steady floor after the agony of Ghost City. He remembered chicken legs and twine and musk. He remembered feet on his back and waiting for the inevitable. He didn't know what had been said.

Probably enough.

"He used me." They were barely words. A scrape of air past his suddenly dry throat.

"I know." The words were said just as plain, just as matter of fact, and yet the undercurrent was pure, red-hot fury. Hua Cheng knew, and he was furious about it. Xie Lian found he was able to suck in the barest breath. At the very least, Hua Cheng hadn't drawn his hand out from between Xie Lian's yet.

"He didn't always— when he— sometimes he finished— my hair. In my hair. It's dirty. You can't touch it."

And it was out and it was over and now all Xie Lian had to do was endure and breath and wait for the consequences. It was out of his hands now and that was a relief.

(A part of him, a part that was feeling faint and jittery and overwrought, wanted to sink to the floor and lie down under the table until everything stopped feeling quite so much.)

Finally, after what felt like a moment that would stretch on forever, Hua Cheng spoke in a soft, clear voice. "If you want it cut, then we'll cut it. But if you're willing, I would still like to wash it."

Xie Lian let his head fall against his chest and just squeezed Hua Cheng's hand all the tighter. It must hurt, it had to hurt, Xie Lian wasn't thinking about his own strength and he could feel the press of Hua Cheng's knuckle bones but Hua Cheng just squeezed back. Finally he nodded, and Hua Cheng let out a breath.

"Gege, I'll go get some oils and brushes. Please make yourself comfortable, I'll be right back."

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

time for something a bit more gentle...
for everyone who had been eagerly awaiting the hair washing: same

It took considerable effort to do only as he'd said and to just collect the products that would help clean and untangle His Highness's hair. It was very tempting to delay things. Not for long, by no more than an incense or two, just long enough to go pay that piece of trash a visit.

Because how could he not? Every moment that human was allowed to exist in relative comfort was a moment that made Hua Cheng feel like his entire body was being held over a flame and the more time he spent near his god the worse that feeling got. How could he ignore it, after needing to listen to his god even hint at what had been done to him? After hearing that he thought *himself* too dirty for the likes of *Hua Cheng* to touch him? As if getting to do so were not the greatest honour that Hua Cheng could imagine. As if Hua Cheng's very skin was not singing from every brief point of contact he had received that day.

Hua Cheng knew what it meant to be filthy. He would leverage that knowledge against anyone who dared make his god feel that way for even an instance, against anyone that thought they could defile him, hurt him in such a profound way, because every moment Hua Cheng spent with his god gave him new insight into the fissures that had been carved deep into his heart and mind.

Carrying His Highness back to Paradise Manor, even with the aid of his dice, had been harrowing. He had woken in fits and starts, all of them agonised and violent and with no awareness of what was happening. Hua Cheng wasn't sure if the lack of awareness was better or worse. He could only hope now that His Highness remembered little of it, because being the one to hold his god while he had been terrified and trying to break free had been one of the worst things Hua Cheng had experienced in his long life.

It was only after Hua Cheng had gotten him into the bed that had been waiting for him for decades — centuries, really — that he seemed to ease into a fuller sleep, his exhausted body finally taking the comfort it could find.

It had been tempting to use that time His Highness had slept to storm down to the cells and tear that mortal to pieces. He knew Yin Yu had carried out his commands to the letter when interning the human, but he lacked a certain creativity at which Hua Cheng could only despair. The pain and fear the mortal would be feeling right now would be nothing more than mundane. It made him want to go correct it, immediately. To show the mortal what real torment looked like, to show him what eight hundred years of resentment could brew.

But he hadn't. Not then while His Highness had slept, and not now that he was fetching hair products.

Because at the time, to imagine himself doing that, to imagine himself donning some monstrous skin that would make the mortal boil in his own nightmares, meant also imagining what he would do if Xie Lian had woken while he was away. Alone, in an unknown bed, having just been won like cattle by an evil Ghost King.

It had been unthinkable, so Hua Cheng had forced himself to swallow his desires like bile and think about what skin he would like to wear when His Highness woke instead. He had put no effort into the one he had been wearing in the Gambler's Den, and he was certain that after that entire wretched ordeal His Highness could only have bad connotations with it. Who could possibly want to be near the monster that had held you down and tortured you? So that meant Hua Cheng would disappear from Xie Lian's sights, and San Lang would take his place: a servant who was there only to be a mouthpiece for the distant Hua Cheng and to serve his god in whatever way was needed.

This, of course, had lasted about a sichen. Even less, though his god had apparently tried to give him some face by not admitting to seeing through his pathetic ruse immediately.

His god was too good. Too forgiving. Somehow, Hua Cheng would find a way to properly repent for everything he had done in the past day, followed by his centuries of failure, but until then he would focus on the most immediate ways he could put his god at ease and aid in his recovery.

Torturing a human until he would willingly strangle himself with his own internal organs would not actually accomplish either of those goals.

But it would make Hua Cheng feel good.

So it would have to wait, because right now he had a sacred duty.

He gathered basins, oils, soaps, combs, and brushes, and rushed back with all due haste. Even with his butterflies keeping an eye on things, today had been altogether too alarming for Hua Cheng to feel good about leaving his god alone for any longer than he must. Irrationally, he kept expecting him to disappear like a dream, to fade and leave only the knowledge that Hua Cheng had been too late.

When he returned, he found His Highness waiting for him.

On his knees.

It was a battle to keep his feelings from his face.

(*He was so fucking tired of seeing his god on his knees.*)

Xie Lian was kneeling on a pillow in front of the bed, obviously with the intention that Hua Cheng should sit behind him, to better access his hair. It was reasonable. Sensible and

practical, so much like his god. And Hua Cheng would rather disperse his ashes than allow it.

"You'll get uncomfortable sitting like that," he said as soon as he entered, immediately bustling to draw a low-backed chair from the wall and position it in the centre of the room. "You said so yourself that it'll take a long time."

Xie Lian blinked up at him.

"But if I sit there, San Lang would have to stand the whole time. Surely that would be more uncomfortable for you than me kneeling?"

Hua Cheng absolutely knew which one would make him more uncomfortable. If it weren't wildly inappropriate, he would have snatched Xie Lian off the ground already and carried him off somewhere much more comfortable to sit. Or maybe have just kept him in his arms indefinitely. He was sure he could think of a way to ensure that that was comfortable for His Highness.

"Not at all, I'm used to being on my feet," he said instead, since that was significantly less likely to horrify Xie Lian.

"I'm used to being on my knees," Xie Lian countered.

Hua Cheng could see the exact moment his words caught up to him, because his face suddenly twisted, and his eyes got that strained, distant look to them. Like he was seeing something Hua Cheng couldn't; it made Hua Cheng want to throw himself in front of Xie Lian and protect him from whatever invisible threat was going after him. Or maybe just stare into his eyes until he tipped right in and could fight whatever monster had its fangs sunk into his mind.

Since he could do neither of those things, he said instead, "Gege, this one gets so antsy if he has to sit still. Please don't make me, I'll surely be shifting about the whole time and I might make a bigger mess out of your hair. Please permit this one to stand."

Xie Lian blinked, and his eyes focused back on Hua Cheng (which was the best feeling in the world, but also a little like he was being burnt alive in Mount Tonglu's fiery core). His god gave a weak smile. "San Lang must have been a horrible student, to be so antsy."

"The worst," Hua Cheng agreed, as he silently celebrated the fact that Xie Lian rose and moved to the chair instead.

He didn't miss the way His Highness almost tripped on his way up, once again overcome by some manner of dizziness. It didn't seem to bother him when he was sitting down — at least not that Hua Cheng could see, he seemed to have no problem eating or drinking — but it always struck when standing, and seemed to be an ongoing issue while walking. He longed to reach out and steady him, but His Highness did not seem to welcome touch, at least not often. Rightly so. Hua Cheng would never presume to force his presence on his god.

But now his presence was being *requested* . His god was sitting here, in the room he had built for him, trusting Hua Cheng, a Ghost King who had confessed to destroying thirty-three previous gods, to stand at his back and run his fingers through his hair.

This felt closer to divinity than any moment of that brief, farcical ascension.

"If it takes too long, or you realise it's a lost cause, just give it up," Xie Lian said after getting settled, while Hua Cheng set up a table next to them to hold his supplies. "Just cut it off, if it's beyond saving."

Hua Cheng would not. There had been so many countless instances in which he had failed to save his god, but this, however minor it may be, would not be one of them. And so it began. He didn't even bother starting with a brush, instead he dragged a tall stand that had previously held a vase behind Xie Lian and put a basin of water on it. He coaxed Xie Lian to lean back, so he could begin to rub soap into the thick mats of hair with his fingers. Xie Lian just sighed, already sounding resigned to failure.

That could not be allowed, so Hua Cheng began to talk. He hadn't beaten over a dozen civil gods at debate for nothing, he knew he was a perfectly capable conversationalist. So he carried on an earlier conversation they had been having about books, enquiring about the sort that Xie Lian had been forced to read in his youth. Enquiring about which had been good, and eager to share his thoughts when it was one he had also read, and delighting in Xie Lian's put upon descriptions of the bad ones. They debated the ethics of one text, and Hua Cheng managed to draw a chuckle from Xie Lian when he went on at length about the redundancy of another that Xie Lian confessed to falling asleep to constantly.

During this time, Hua Cheng had dumped and refilled the basin on three separate occasions, but the water was no longer becoming immediately murky and he had begun to divide the hair into separate chunks instead of a singular clump.

Once he had it divided into more manageable segments, he began with oil and his widest-toothed comb, starting at the bottom. He kept a firm grip on the hair, to ensure he wasn't yanking at Xie Lian's scalp, and began picking away at the knots. As he did so, he began to figure out what sort of books Xie Lian might be interested in now, so he could draw a mental list of things to bring out for him.

By this point Xie Lian had slumped lower and lower into the chair and his eyes were growing heavy but he gamely kept the conversation going — though he begged off literary topics, claiming it was too complex for him to think about now. Instead, Hua Cheng got him talking about what he liked to do instead when he wasn't being tormented by tutors. Xie Lian spoke affectionately of his early years of cultivating, and the games he and his friends got up to as children, while very carefully talking around any names or events that might be identifiable. For Hua Cheng's part, he very carefully made sure he didn't audibly scoff everytime General Big Dick or the Sweeping General were hinted at.

Xie Lian asked about his own childhood after a while, and Hua Cheng spoke in a few generalities but both seemed happy to leave the past behind at that point.

By now, one whole clump of hair had been worked free into individual strands. It still wasn't perfect, but he could draw a wide-toothed comb from root to tip with only the occasional snag.

Clearly looking for a topic that wasn't quite as dreary as the past, Xie Lian asked after Ghost City.

"Gege must have seen it. It doesn't get any better with more exposure," Hua Cheng scoffed, as he began on the next clump.

"I don't remember much about it… my memory really is bad, and I was… I was quite overwhelmed. I couldn't make sense of much besides the noise and smells."

"Noisy and smelly is as apt a description as any," said Hua Cheng, so that he didn't have to dwell on what that must have meant for Xie Lian, to be in a state that even Ghost City had not left a lasting impression. Whatever else you might say about it, it was memorable.

"It's your city, isn't it? It must have redeeming traits, for San Lang to choose to patronise it. I want to understand."

So Hua Cheng attempted to describe Ghost City. He focused on descriptions and stories about its citizens that he thought might make His Highness laugh, since it wasn't like he could go on about its virtues.

He was running out of things to say about his cesspit of a city by the time he had finished the second clump of hair, but by that point the late hour had taken its toll and Xie Lian was fast asleep in the chair. He drew most of the butterflies back into his vambraces, leaving just enough to light his work area and ensure that, should Xie Lian wake, it wouldn't be to darkness. Then he sunk entirely into his work.

Stroke, after stroke, after stroke, and Hua Cheng thought that for perhaps the first time in eight hundred years he truly understood the meaning of devotion. Those petty people who got on their knees and bowed his heads to whatever worthless trash they chose to worship in Heaven — it was pointless pageantry and debasement, a stupid, unearned powerplay. This was worship, this was purpose, to simply stand in the exact spot he needed to be and do the exact job that needed to be done, while his god rested.

After everything he had been through, after everything Hua Cheng had personally put him through over the past day, the fact that His Highness felt safe enough to fall asleep with Hua Cheng at his back was enough to make him want to drop to his knees in rhapsody. Never had he felt more right.

By the time dawn came, not a single knot remained and he carefully worked rice water through every strand of the hair, until it hung sleek and glossy. Once he had finished that, he had taken out a delicate pair of scissors and clipped the very lowest fringe of hair, removing dead, ragged ends so that the hair once again hung even and neat, the way it had looked while the world had still acknowledge him as The God-Pleasing Crown Prince. Next he drew out the finest toothed comb he owned and a bottle of pyrethrin oil and went through the whole

process again. This time he started at the scalp and worked through the hair carefully, eyes sharp for any area that needed more attention.

It was only as he had completed that and was reluctantly acknowledging that brushing was no longer serving any purpose other than letting him greedily enjoy the silky flow of his god's hair, that Xie Lian stirred. He twitched, groaned, and lifted a hand to rub what was probably a rather stiff neck by now.

San Lang took a step back, and called a soft greeting, not wanting to startle His Highness when he was still waking and groggy.

"Hmm? Oh! San Lang! I fell asleep?"

He sounded so startled by it, as if he had only just nodded off, that Hua Cheng couldn't help but be enamoured. How could anyone resist his god when he was like this? Hua Cheng never wanted to share this with anyone.

(When Hua Cheng thought of who had previously seen his god sleeping, who had previously woken him and how he had done so — Hua Cheng needed to shove it deep into the pit of resentment that fueled his core and promise to return to it when he wasn't being graced with his god's sleepy, blinking eyes.)

"En. Gege seemed very relaxed." If he sounded like he was bragging, that's because he was. "Should I call for breakfast now that you're awake?"

"Breakfast…? Ah, yes, I suppose. Why… oh! My hair!" His hand rose seemingly without a thought, curiosity rising as soon as he remembered why he had fallen asleep in a chair. Hua Cheng waited with barely contained anticipation as Xie Lian's fingers brushed the silky strands that now hung down his back.

The softest of exhales, disbelief and awe, and Hua Cheng coud fill his dead veins with that sound and it would keep him going longer than any resentment.

"How did you do this? This must have taken forever. I can't believe I fell asleep…"

"It was my pleasure, gege," he said, with the utmost sincerity. "Would you like a change of robes for the morning? Yin Yu will be a few moments yet with breakfast."

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This time, knowing what to expect, Xie Lian didn't startle at the appearance of Yin Yu and was able to thank him for breakfast and for having woken up in the middle of the night for his sake.

A part of Xie Lian's brain, a part that had been left to sit and watch and assess while the rest of his mind had fallen to pieces around him, wondered if he should feel nervous about Yin Yu. It was, after all, one thing to grow used to Hua Cheng and accept that he was likely a safe person to be around, but knowing that there was a whole separate person lurking somewhere within this manor house was disconcerting. He tried to remind himself that of course an

estate, especially one owned by someone described as both a city lord and a king of ghosts, would have plenty of other people within its walls. There should be all manner of servants working around the manor, moving as silent as shadows and beyond Xie Lian's notice.

So could any of them enter this room besides Hua Cheng and Yin Yu?

If they were ghosts, a door might not even be that much of an obstacle.

"What is gege thinking?" Hua Cheng asked across the table.

Xie Lian set down the bowl of congee he had been drinking from and said, "I was thinking I would like to visit San Lang's garden today, if that's alright."

Hua Cheng seemed pleased by this, and the rest of the meal passed quickly. Fortunately, after eating such a large midnight snack, this meal had been allowed to be quite simple. There was a light tea, some congee with shredded chicken, and a platter of fruit. Xie Lian made sure to eat, because he understood the importance of reintroducing food to his body, but he ate sparingly. Two meals so close together had become a luxury, and like any luxury one wasn't used to it felt overindulgent and too rich.

Sure enough, after his single bowl of congee, he was rather queasy. This wasn't ideal when he realised that by asking to see the garden it would inevitably mean quite a lot of walking on his part.

Hua Cheng courteously arranged their empty dishes back on the tray so he could pretend not to watch Xie Lian while he stood. It wasn't that his body was weak — though a little undernourished and neglected, he had really had much worse over the years — but any change of elevation inevitably made the world twist around him.

In a way, weak legs would almost be easier to deal with than a weak mind. He was, at his heart, a martial god and he could handle reconditioning a body that had been left to ruin. He had done it after his first banishment, when he had been forced to relearn how to be mortal after his brief time in the Heavenly Realm. He had done it after he had finally escaped from the coffin and his entire body had been little better than a true corpse. That had been a gruelling process, of relearning how his body moved and rebuilding muscles that had been eaten down to tinder.

That his body was willing, and it was a treacherous mind that insisted on misunderstanding the world, brought with it a new sort of frustration.

But he had endured the nail and had endured the imprisonment, and now it was over. Like so many other times, he had outlasted his ordeal. So now he would endure the recovery. The fact that he had good company for the initial stages of it should be heartening.

Still, he sighed wearily as his brain slowly made sense of the walls and the floor from this height and everything stabilised a bit. There was still a swooping sense of vertigo that made the congee in his belly feel like pond mud, but it was bearable.

"Ready?" Hua Cheng asked, to which Xie Lian agreed.

It took five steps to realise this would be trickier than expected, and another seven for Xie Lian to realise he had possibly made a mistake.

Of course he had walked around before now. To the bathing chamber and back, as well as from the bed to the table. He knew that the vertigo was still a problem — especially after the rather disastrous bathing incident — but somehow he had expected it to settle the more he walked, just as it settled the longer he stood or sat in one spot. Instead, it was like each step threw the world out of balance and before his brain could make sense of it another step had occurred to send it careening off in an even worse direction.

Xie Lian slowed and braced a hand against the hallway wall.

"Gege?"

"I'm fine," Xie Lian said, forcing his feet to continue.

Having a wall beneath his hand helped. That way no matter what tricks his brain tried to pull, he could confirm there was at least one thing that was still and stable.

Xie Lian could see how Hua Cheng was adjusting his pace to match Xie Lian's slow stagger, but he didn't comment on it. Xie Lian smiled encouragingly at him, and this prompted Hua Cheng to begin telling him about some of the plants he had out in the garden. Apparently Hua Cheng travelled with some frequency and would often return with new flowers from all over the three realms.

This was something Xie Lian could do. He could do it. He had endured much, much worse than some dizziness. In fact, most of the agonies he had endured recently he had endured *while* dizzy, so this really should be nothing in comparison. And what did some minor embarrassment matter? Xie Lian didn't get embarrassed by such things. Admittedly his athleticism had always been one thing, no matter what else changed, that he could hold with pride, but there was no great crime in being slow or unsteady.

Of course, being slow and unsteady had damned him while he was in that hut.

It wasn't hard to overpower someone who became ill just by standing up, or who became so overwhelmed by sights and smells that he had to collapse.

He thought again of the unseen servants that almost certainly filled these halls. He didn't sense anyone's presence right now, but who knew where they were or what they were doing. As ghosts, he may not even see them until it was too late. But they would be able to see him, shuffling and disoriented.

A finger brushed the back of his neck and Xie Lian jumped.

The jump immediately took what little sense of balance Xie Lian had and shattered it. He had to stop completely and shut his eyes, while simultaneously realising that he was being ridiculous, that no one had touched him, that it had been a breeze through the open window they had just passed.

Hua Cheng's talk had trailed off, as he clearly wasn't sure if it was more rude to continue talking like nothing had happened or draw attention to Xie Lian's fit. Xie Lian wanted to tell him to continue, but words were getting lost in the winding maze between his brain and his body, and even with his eyes shut the world was twisting around him. In fact, with his eyes shut and the breeze coming in from the window he found himself getting more and more mixed up by the sensations, suddenly struggling to remember if he was inside or outside — had they reached the gardens? Or were they still en route? Were they in the halls of the hut— of the manor? Were they in the quiet, dark forest, surrounded by roots and mud?

Xie Lian crouched down without really thinking about it, and immediately that helped some. The massive yawning space shrunk somewhat, and he could feel a wall at his side and the floor just below him. He knelt down and that helped more. He pressed his palms and head flat to the floor and finally, finally he felt like he could breathe again. When he opened his eyes, the only thing he had to look at were the grooves in the wood floor. They were straight, even lines and Xie Lian kept his eyes on them until his world started to feel like it could be made of straight lines again.

Really, when had embarrassment started to feature in his life again? This was too much. It would have been easier to endure without such feelings, but somehow he found himself regretting how Hua Cheng must see, cowering on the floor like this.

Hua Cheng, though, seemed unphased. Or at least non-judgemental. "Should we return to the room, gege?"

He could give in right now and crawl back into the safe, still bed. But crouched like this on the floor, with his untangled, clean hair curtained around his face, it served as a reminder that good things still existed in this world so long as an effort was put into it. He would like to experience good things again.

Good things were so much easier to achieve with a little help.

Xie Lian sat up slowly. Hua Cheng was down on the floor with him, kneeling just far enough away as to be out of arm's reach. Suddenly that felt much, much too far away.

"I'm alright but—" How to explain? He had only hinted around the issue. "—I have a hard time keeping track of things when I'm standing. That is, I can see everything, but I'm not sure I'm processing it quickly enough. Being so high off the ground makes me feel unbalanced, and walking makes me feel like I'm going to fall. Everything is moving around me. It's dizzying."

"Is this… a new problem?" He very carefully did not ask if Xie Lian had been like this with the man or if it was the yanking out of the nail that had done it.

"It was like this before," Xie Lian said, because he wouldn't want Hua Cheng to fret that he may have played a role in it. "Only, well, I didn't have much reason to walk around before. I… That is… I mostly stayed near the floor."

He could see the way Hua Cheng's hands tightened into fists, but it didn't affect the calm tenor of his voice. "Is there any way I can help?"

Breathing out, Xie Lian accepted that he was either going to have to go through the embarrassment of asking for help, or lose any opportunity to see something as pleasant as a garden. Really, put like that it should be no contest.

"Would you help me walk? Touching a wall helps, but I thought, perhaps if I have a hold of the person next to me, who's moving at the same pace…"

"Of course!"

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile because he had known Hua Cheng less than two days and yet he had still known that would be the response. It was astounding that someone as wholly generous as Hua Cheng wasn't constantly being taken advantage of — though he seemed to have had control of things well enough in the Gambler's Den. Perhaps it was only people he was personally invested in that he became so generous around.

Hua Cheng was immediately by his side, and Xie Lian stood with his help. It took a moment to figure out how best to try this, but eventually Xie Lian took the most obvious option: he tucked his hands against Hua Cheng's elbow and leant lightly against him, as if they were simply two friends strolling a market together. It was terribly intimate for two men who barely knew each other, but Xie Lian was used to coasting along with the strange twists and turns his life took so this wasn't anything too odd for him.

Perhaps it was different for Hua Cheng though. Xie Lian had come to notice that Hua Cheng rarely breathed unless he was actively talking and needed the air for that, but as he put more weight against Hua Cheng's comfortingly firm and cool arm, he heard him suck in some air. Was Xie Lian's weight uncomfortable? Or was it the closeness? Was he going to ask him to stop? Or to put more distance?

He waited, but nothing else was said so Xie Lian just tucked himself comfortably against the ghost.

"Okay, I'm ready to try again."

And then they were walking once more. Hua Cheng's strides were even and leisurely. As slow as Xie Lian had been while gripping the wall, but with a nonchalant air that suggested he had nowhere to be and wanted nothing more than to stroll languidly through his own halls. Xie Lian was grateful.

This proved a much better solution than the wall. It didn't make the vertigo go away, but Hua Cheng was as stable as any wall (more so, perhaps — it might be silly but Xie Lian had an easier time imagining a wall crumbling than the Ghost King) with the added bonus that if Xie Lian became overwhelmed it was easy to close his eyes for a moment and let Hua Cheng's even stride carry him along until he was ready to focus again.

When they reached the garden, the efforts proved well worth it. The Kingdom of Xianle had valued beauty in many ways, but even the palace gardens must surely pale in comparison to the wild, harmonious colour that spread out before him like the grandest of tapestries. The sheer enormity and brightness of it, bathed in unflinching sunlight, was almost enough to make Xie Lian's eyes hurt but it was a worthwhile pain.

They spent the day out there. It was an easy thing to do, with a garden this big, and it felt like there was constantly new areas to explore, a bridge to cross, a little island placed in the largest lotus pond, a shaded spot behind a hill, a copse of bamboo along one edge, a calm rock garden tucked away behind a magnolia tree. So they would walk a little, until Hua Cheng had led them to a bench or a flat stone or sometimes just a comfortable patch of grass, and then they would sit so Xie Lian could recover and admire the view.

It made Xie Lian want to reach up and readjust his hat, to lift it from his neck and angle it so that it could keep the worst of the sun from his eyes, but that of course was an impossibility now. It had been a long time since he had last seen that old hat.

Some things couldn't be replaced. Some things, when they broke, were just broken. Some things when they were lost, were lost forever.

But there was lots to see and smell and do and that kept Xie Lian's mind off things he would rather not think about. Unlike Ghost City this garden was undemanding and let Xie Lian come to it. The cool breeze made sweet smells waft around them but disperse just as quickly, and often the smell wouldn't even be apparent until Xie Lian insisted they stop so he could lean down and stick his nose in a flower. And the one time he did find himself growing truly overwhelmed — shortly after arriving at the garden, still worn out from the walk down and trying to see everything at once — Hua Cheng had just told him he should lie down and close his eyes and nap if that was what he wanted.

Perhaps it should feel exposed, napping in an open space like this when he had been on high alert for so long, but there was nothing further from that dark, musky hut than this spacious, welcoming garden. Perhaps it should have felt patronising to be told to sleep like an overexcited child but it didn't feel like that either. It had been much too long since another person had taken any interest in Xie Lien's wellbeing for it to not feel vaguely miraculous to hear such words spoken. So he took the advice, thinking he would only close his eyes until the sharp little headache had receded somewhat.

He ended up napping for half a sichen.

He apologised to Hua Cheng after that, but Hua Cheng had been lying on his back next to him and swore he had been watching the clouds the whole time. Xie Lian found himself strangely doubtful of this, but Hua Cheng seemed happy so he supposed it was no matter.

They ended up having lunch among the flowers as well, and Xie Lian really was going to feel bad about making Yin Yu run all over the estate, chasing them down with unpredictable meals. He was going to have to attempt to talk to Yin Yu properly, to actually get to know this very diligent assistant of Hua Cheng's.

(Hua Cheng insisted that he was no one of consequence and should be ignored, but Xie Lian found himself doubting this too. As they had had wandered and chatted, Xie Lian had learnt that Hua Cheng did not, in fact, keep servants in the manor. This was almost unbelievable, in an estate this large, but it certainly said something about how much Hua Cheng must value his assistant, if Yin Yu was the only other person besides Xie Lian permitted here with regularity.)

(It also seemed to say something about Xie Lian: either that Hua Cheng considered him an incomparably valuable person, or that he was an exceptionally amusing new toy for someone who clearly had too much free time.)

(He couldn't even begrudge the obvious answer because Hua Cheng was good enough company that Xie Lian found he quite enjoyed amusing Hua Cheng in whatever ways he could.)

Lunch that day was steamed buns, and Xie Lian raised his brows at Hua Cheng who shrugged indulgently. "Gege said he likes them," was all the justification he gave. It was the perfect meal to have outside though, not requiring any cutlery and easy to carry the remainders with them when they grew full and wanted to walk some more.

By the time they returned to Xie Lian's rooms, the sun was setting and nothing felt more natural than to hold Hua Cheng's arm while he walked.

"I was thinking, since gege enjoyed seeing the gardens so much, perhaps you would like to see more of the manor tomorrow?" Hua Cheng said as they entered the room and he steered him towards the chair that was still left out from the hair washing. (Xie Lian would have happily just sank right down to the floor and rested there, but Hua Cheng seemed set on the chair.)

"En, that sounds nice! If it's even half as pretty as the garden, it will be something to see! You must like your home a lot, San Lang."

Hua Cheng shrugged. "It's something to fill the time with. But it's really no home, gege, just a residence at best."

"Oh?" said Xie Lian, smiling as he leaned back in the chair and let his eyes rest. The headache was trying to creep back in but he didn't want to end this conversation just yet. "Is there a difference?"

"Of course. A home is where a family lives. I live alone, so what can this be but a residence for a person to sleep in when they must and store junk that can't be kept elsewhere."

"San Lang has such a strict definition! By that account, I haven't had a home in many years." Not the least because any house he occupied tended to fall down or catch fire within the month. It wasn't as if he had a family to share one with, not in centuries, not unless you counted Ruoye. That was one more thing he hadn't known to treasure enough before driving it away.

(Would you count the man? What defined a family, besides two people who lived together? Love wasn't even necessary, not really, not when you considered how bad some people's childhoods could be, or the heartless marriages people were forced into.)

(Had that hut been his only home in eight hundred years?)

With a headache already throbbing lightly behind his eyes, this was not a thought he was willing to entertain.

"Where will we go tomorrow? The library?"

"We could, but I had a different idea as well."

There was a note of mischief back in Hua Cheng's voice. It made Xie Lian open his eyes and scrutinise him. He seemed very eager to say whatever was on his mind.

"Oh?"

"Gege mentioned he preferred martial arts to reading as a child, and this manor has an armoury."

Xie Lian was on his feet so quickly that the dizziness made him immediately sit back down with a thump. But that didn't quell his enthusiasm.

"There's an armoury!"

Hua Cheng, who had briefly looked concerned at Xie Lian's fall, recovered and laughed at him instead. "En!"

"We should go!"

"Didn't you say you were tired? Weren't we going to have dinner? Is gege going to starve this San Lang?"

Xie Lian resisted the urge to pout. It wasn't like Hua Cheng even needed to eat, and Xie Lian was used to going days without! So he really was just doing this to tease Xie Lian!

"I would never deprive San Lang," Xie Lian said, though he suspected more of that repressed pout was coming across in his words than he would like. "Though I can't say the same for the reverse."

Hua Cheng laughed again, even more genuinely this time. Which was fair, because it was a ridiculous statement — not since before his second banishment had anyone ever been so overwhelmingly generous to him.

"Tomorrow," Hua Cheng promised.

"Tomorrow," Xie Lian agreed morosely. He could be patient.

Dinner passed pleasantly, and Xie Lian was finding he could eat a little more with each meal, so long as he paced himself appropriately during the meal before. By the time they finished and Xie Lian was feeling full and drowsy, he had to admit it was a good thing they were saving the armoury for tomorrow. He would undoubtedly want to run around and touch everything if they went now, and he really was feeling quite worn out from such a busy day.

Hua Cheng lingered while Xie Lian changed into sleeping robes behind the privacy screen — as soft and luxurious as any other robe he had been given so far, but less likely to get tangled in — and left only once Xie Lian was comfortably in bed. Two butterflies, however, broke away from his vambrace to flutter in a corner.

“Gege doesn’t mind?” Hua Cheng asked once they had done so.

Xie Lian should mind, perhaps. Being spied on by a ghost was one of those things over which his former heavenly colleagues would have spit blood. But it was San Lang and he knew perfectly well that it came from a place of concern, not malice. If Hua Cheng had wanted to be malicious or cruel, all he would have had to do was leave Xie Lian to writhe and struggle on the hallway floor, rather than carefully guiding him to a beautiful garden for him to rest in.

And in any case…

“I like the light they cast,” Xie Lian admitted. “It’s like keeping stars in the room. But I don’t want them to disturb your rest just because I might have a bad dream.”

“I’ve already told gege that I don’t sleep. You can’t disturb me.”

“And I’ve told San Lang that I don’t believe that. I know Yin Yu now, I can ask him. If I keep the butterflies they won’t wake you for any little thing, will they?”

“I’ll only come if I’m called for,” Hua Cheng finally promised, though Xie Lian couldn’t help but doubt that wording.

Once he was gone, Xie Lian was very glad indeed he had approved of the butterflies’ presence. It was shocking how much darker a room became once you were the only person in it. He crawled awkwardly across the bed to slide the paper window open and let the moonlight stream more fully into the room. Only then, did he close his eyes and try to chase sleep.

It did not come as easily as it had in the sunshine surrounded by flowers and San Lang.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I think some of you guys have been waiting for this next part. Hopefully it satisfies u.u

EDIT: almost forgot to mention! In case you didn't notice, I added a Part 1.5 to this series that rewrites Hua Cheng's arrival at the Gambler's Den from Xie Lian's POV in case anyone somehow wants more whump on top of their whump!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hua Cheng's attention was divided.

He was loath to venture far from his god while everything about his renewed presence in Hua Cheng's life — and everything about his recovery — was still so new and raw, but His Highness had requested privacy and space. These had surely been two luxuries that had been stripped from him, and Hua Cheng would never dare be the one to trample them. That gave him at least a few sichen of time during which His Highness did not need or want him at his side. If that changed, he was keeping an eye on things through the butterflies and had his dice in his pocket, but for now he had been dismissed, and explicitly asked not to come unless called.

Which also brought up the matter of the meeting he knew he was due to have the next day… it was a plan that had been made months before and not one he had considered at all since finding His Highness until Yin Yu had reminded him of it. It was tempting to cancel it outright, but if His Highness decided he didn't want Hua Cheng hanging around him, if he decided he would rather have space away from the dangerous Ghost King, then perhaps having an in-built excuse would be useful for both of them.

Well, it was a choice he wouldn't make on his own. His Highness deserved to make his own decisions about how his time was spent.

In the meantime, he had a debt to collect that was long overdue. And Hua Cheng never forgot a debt.

The cells he was now descending into were deep and hidden. They were strong enough to hold gods if he so wanted — not that he had ever felt inclined to have a god as such a long term house guest before, whatever the accommodations — so for a human it was undeniably overkill.

Well, not literally. Not yet at least. Hua Cheng would be taking his time before allowing that particular mercy.

The air here was cold and unnaturally still; it made even breathing feel heavy and laborious, for any living creature that bothered with such things. This was a dead space, killing even light and sound that dared try to penetrate its stone and iron walls. The jingle of silver on Hua Cheng's boots were an anomaly as he stepped across the stone floors, letting his form shift as he did so.

The form he took now was an elegant one. A little shorter than he naturally was, with a sharp jawline, and a noble sweep to his nose. His eyes were large, soft, and dark, and his hair, equally dark, was drawn up into an elaborate guan. He cut a handsome, imposing figure, like a charming young lord. At one point Hua Cheng had considered donning a truly monstrous skin before visiting this prisoner, but eventually decided that that would be unfair.

His Highness, after all, had not been taken and tortured by some grotesque monster. It was not a monster that gave him nightmares now. And so it would not be a monster that visited the prisoner. He, too, could learn to fear the absolute depravity that could only be offered up by humanity.

There was no door to this cell, just a barrier that repelled all but Hua Cheng, so there was nothing to open. He simply walked up and walked past. He could tell the exact moment the human realised he was not alone, the exact moment he registered the tinkling of the silver ornaments on Hua Cheng's boots and the susurration of long robes as they dragged luxuriously on the ground. The man hunched in on himself, smelling of filth and fear, and cowered. Good.

"Please, please let me go," the man sobbed. His voice was a dry croak. This was the first time Hua Cheng had found time to come down here, and it wasn't like Yin Yu was inclined to linger. He wasn't the sort to visit prisoners on his downtime. With both of them otherwise occupied, the man certainly hadn't been given any more food or water than he had been left with initially.

His Highness's body showed the very obvious signs of malnutrition. Muscles worn thin, bones too prominent, and a very careful approach to eating. His Highness couldn't die. How long had he been allowed to continue to "not-die" while not being fed? The thought of His Highness, who had fed Hua Cheng from his own altar, being forced to go without was revolting. It made Hua Cheng idly wonder how long this mortal could last. Whether it would be satisfying to find out, or if that was too mundane a death to allow.

"Do you know why you're here?" Hua Cheng asked, staring down at the worm as it writhed at his feet.

"I… I made a bet… I lost… Please, I didn't mean to…"

"You didn't mean to bet your life? Or you didn't mean to lose?"

The man whimpered, though Hua Cheng knew the answer.

"You didn't seem remorseful about betting someone else's life."

The man stared up at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes. "The… the demon? The boy—*augh!*"

Hua Cheng had placed his boot lightly down on the nail that protruded from the meat of the man's shoulder. The old, crusty blood that had stained the robes around it grew fresh and bright as Hua Cheng pressed down and dug his toe in. He could feel the way the nail grated against bone. It was almost musical, like running a mallet around the edge of a singing bowl.

The man sobbed brokenly, but it didn't erase the way he had let the word *boy* curl over his tongue.

"Please, my lord!" the mortal screamed. "Does he not please you? Please, please, it's not my fault, it's not—"

"What does fault matter?" Hua Cheng asked. "Was it Xie Lian's fault that you took him and tortured him? Or did it just amuse you? Perhaps this amuses me."

"Xie…? I didn't…"

"You didn't even know his name," Hua Cheng remarked. "But you still took him and hammered a nail through his head and tortured him."

"I thought he was a ghost!" Then, he seemed to realise who and what exactly he was talking to, and whimpered further.

Finally, Hua Cheng lifted his foot and let the man curl up on himself the best he could. His hands were bound behind his back, as Xie Lian's had been — much looser, in fact, much more lenient because he did not intend to have the man die from a septic limb just yet — which ensured he couldn't remove the nail. All he could do was twist in on himself like a maggot.

"Would you like to know who he is?" Hua Cheng asked conversationally.

"Anything, anything."

"His name is Xie Lian. He is the Crown Prince of Xianle. The Flower-Crowned Martial God. He is *my* god."

The man stared up at him with raw, naked terror that overflowed from his eyes. "I didn't know," he whispered. "I swear, I didn't know he was a god. I never… I never… not if I had known. I swear…"

"You wouldn't have tortured him, if you had known he was a god?"

"No, no, no," the man swore brokenly.

"You wouldn't have raped him, if you had known he was a god?"

"No, never!"

"A god doesn't deserve such vile treatment, does he?"

"No!"

Hua Cheng walked idly to a shelf built into one of the cell's walls. He examined the tools there lazily. Not that he needed tools, and not as if they would be as satisfying as what he could do with his bare hands, but there was something to be said for the way suggestion and threat could sit in the heads of those Hua Cheng hated. He still loved the way those two cowardly generals would flinch and baulk at even the slightest suggestion of his wraith butterflies.

"It's a shame, then, that you aren't a god, isn't it?" he remarked.

Hua Cheng didn't know when His Highness would next have need of him, so he would make the time he had right now count.

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Xie Lian woke drenched in sweat. The dream that had woken him was already fracturing and fading into the darkness, but it left a stickiness behind that had followed him to the waking world. While he knew it was certainly just sweat from tossing and turning so much in his sleep, he still found himself stumbling out of the bed on legs like a fawn, disgust roiling in his stomach.

"Shh," he warned the nearest butterfly.

It managed to flutter in a vaguely disapproving way, but followed Xie Lian as he crossed to the bathing chamber. By giving up pretence and appearance, he was able to keep a grip on the furniture he passed and make it into the room without incident.

The large, copper tub was empty, and the room had a vaguely abandoned, echoey quality like this. Like any room that you inherently felt wasn't meant to be visited in the middle of the night, being here felt like a transgression, but there were washcloths in a neat pile on one set of shelves and a full jug of floral-scented water on another. These he took and sat in a corner of the room, two walls and the floor providing comfortable stability for him while his mind continued to reestablish its connections with reality, to remind him that no matter how sticky he felt he was in a beautifully appointed room and not in a dark hut with a nail in his head.

Dipping his fingers into the water immediately helped. The water was cool and fresh, and the smell was so unlike musk and sweat that it was hard to resist the urge to dump it straight over his head. Instead he wiped down his face and chest and hands, until he felt cool in the night air rather than oppressively hot.

And then, just because he could, he had Ruoye whip out and fetch him a comb. It was soothing to run the comb through his hair, to remember that it was now clean and untouched. The only resistance came from the little tangles that one got from sleep and a day spent active.

He continued to brush, and watched the lazy, glowing spirals of the butterflies as they flew above him. It felt entirely meditative, to be clean and cool and still, to not have a single demand or expectation on him. He couldn't bring himself to stand and ruin this quiet, peaceful moment, and so he didn't. He simply sat, in peace, and enjoyed it.

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Xie Lian woke with a butterfly on his nose and went nearly cross-eyed in his surprise. He sneezed, and the butterfly darted off, something scolding about the way it flapped above his head.

"Well, you shouldn't have landed there then," Xie Lian told it, as he used the walls to pull himself up.

It was disorienting to find oneself waking in a bathing room, especially a room that he had really only seen one time prior and which felt very unfamiliar. But at least it was a pretty place to wake up, and not at all sinister. With the light streaming in, the copper and porcelain in the room gleamed, and the wall of plants made the room feel more like a continuation of the garden than anything else. Xie Lian stretched until his spine cracked and he no longer felt quite so stiff from his second night in a row of waking in a sitting position. With his butterfly companions, he opened the door to the main room.

"Good morning, gege."

As Xie Lian stepped out of the bathing chamber, he found Hua Cheng already seated at the table, a scroll spread out before him as he read.

"Ah, good morning. Were you waiting long for me?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't waiting at all. You're welcome to sleep longer if you like. If I'm intruding, I can leave — I was just making use of the space to do some trivial work."

"What sort of work does a Ghost King do?" Xie Lian asked as he made his way over to the privacy screen to change from his sleeping robes.

"This and that. As little as I can manage. It's not like ghosts have the sort of bureaucracy that the gods do, so I do what I like and leave the rest for others to fight over. Would gege like breakfast now or later?"

Given that Hua Cheng seemed to effectively run a city that was so successful that even cultivators in the mortal realm knew about it, Xie Lian found himself rather sceptical of the dismissive way Hua Cheng referred to himself and his work.

Instead of remarking on this, he said, "I could eat whenever," once he was comfortably dressed.

He had long since been out of the habit of wearing many layers — even as a crown prince, he had really only dressed so heavily for formal events, preferring clothes he could easily cultivate in — but he found it comforting now to have the weight of cloth and embroidery

pressing down on him. It helped define his edges, keeping him pressed into himself while slightly apart from anyone else that might want to grab or touch. The way the robes spread around him when he sat, like a whisper to the rest of the world that this, here, was his space and his only, also satisfied a little, anxious part of his soul.

Once at the table he leaned over to see what Hua Cheng was working on.

"...Is this a spell of some sort?" Whatever it was certainly looked demonic in nature, and completely indecipherable to Xie Lian's eyes — not that he had ever bothered much to study talismanic magic beyond what was standard for a god to know.

To his surprise, rather than launching into a long explanation about the spells that went into defending a city like this, or some such thing, Hua Cheng actually looked embarrassed. Whatever he said was a mumble too low for Xie Lian to make out.

"Pardon?"

"I said it's a financial record," he said, clearing his throat. "I'm meant to be having a meeting with someone who owes me money later today, but since we've decided to go to the armoury I can just tell him to get lost and come another day if gege likes."

"You shouldn't reschedule your meetings because of me," Xie Lian said, but only vaguely because he was too busy squinting at the scroll. "...Do you keep your records in a code? Or did you speak a different language in life?"

Hua Cheng looked more and more despairing. "No, gege. This is just my handwriting."

Finally Xie Lian could pick out a few familiar characters amid the crazed columns. He saw some numbers, dates, and a few notes like "fed pets" and "dinner bill".

It was as if an accountant had died horribly and then risen again as a fierce corpse only to grasp his brush and write with half-rotted fingers and a heart full of malevolence! It was a ledger that had been picked up by a whirlwind of evil intent and spun around until everything was strewn haphazardly across the pages! It really was the most roughshod writing that Xie Lian had ever seen storm across a page and the thought of the great and feared Ghost King, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, sitting and painstakingly filling his records with whatever mad fervour must result in this sort of writing was really just too much. He burst out laughing.

"Gege," said Hua Cheng helplessly.

"Sorry, sorry, my bad," said Xie Lian, fighting to school his expression. "Only, San Lang has quite a distinct style. A lot of flair. It suits him."

"A lot of madness you mean."

Xie Lian pressed on valiantly. "It is so easy to have 'good' writing that looks the same as a hundred scrolls before it, but to have this much… personality…"

Hua Cheng gave a put-upon sigh. "I do want to write well, but it's not as if there's anyone to teach me. You've seen the mob out there, I'm lucky if they even recognize the characters in

their own names."

"There's really no trick to it," mused Xie Lian.

"Then perhaps gege would be willing to teach me?"

"Me? It's been so many years since I've practised my calligraphy, it can't be very good these days… and I wouldn't want to lecture."

"But I feel as if all I've been doing is lecturing and leading," said Hua Cheng. "I would be honoured to let gege take the lead and instruct this poor student."

"Ah, well, in that case, alright. Another time though…"

"The armoury first," Hua Cheng agreed.

"The armoury first," said Xie Lian, who had been thinking about little else since waking up. Since going to sleep, if he was being perfectly honest — nightmare excluded.

At this point there was a knock on the door, and Yin Yu entered once more with breakfast.

Xie Lian recalled abruptly what he had been saying to Hua Cheng the night before. "Oh, that's right, Yin Yu, I had a question for you if you don't mind answering."

Yin Yu paused in the act of arranging dishes on the table, his white mask turning to stare at Xie Lian. "...Of course I'll answer whatever I can for an honoured guest."

It felt so odd to be addressed in such formal tones. It was one thing to have Hua Cheng play around with him and dote on him in such an extravagant way because he had come to the conclusion that the Ghost King really had too much free time and this seemed to bring him pleasure for some unknowable reason, but he wondered what Hua Cheng had told his assistant to be getting such deference from him too.

Regardless, he thickened his face and said, "San Lang says that ghosts don't need to sleep at all, but I don't believe him. Do you know what's true?"

Yin Yu's mask tipped ever so slightly to the side, suggesting he was glancing at his employer about whom he was now being strong-armed into gossiping. But Xie Lian didn't relent, he was determined to tease Hua Cheng if he could manage it.

"I am sure that Chengzhu is more knowledgeable about ghosts than I am," Yin Yu finally said.

"So he doesn't get cranky if he doesn't sleep?" pressed Xie Lian.

"...I wouldn't go that far," said Yin Yu.

"Dismissed," snapped Hua Cheng, who really hadn't been sleeping much.

Yin Yu bowed his way out while Xie Lian smirked into a bowl of broth and lightly spiced vegetables.

"Gege bullies me horribly," Hua Cheng complained, spreading himself across the table.

Bullied or not, Hua Cheng seemed as excited to bring Xie Lian to the armoury after breakfast as Xie Lian was to see it, though he did nothing to rush them as they prepared for the walk. After an entire day strolling arm-in-arm around the garden, Xie Lian didn't hesitate to loop his arms once more around Hua Cheng's elbow, leaning on him and following his easy pace.

Mostly.

Admittedly Xie Lian did keep finding himself wanting to tug them along with impatience. He swore Hua Cheng was slowing them down on purpose. Perhaps an act of vengeance against the cranky comment — ghosts were meant to be vengeful, weren't they? It was the only reasonable explanation for why they weren't there yet.

"Gege has so much energy today," Hua Cheng teased, as they finally came to the doors of the armoury.

These were solid steel, and carved with fearsome beasts that seem to come to life and part at Hua Cheng's approach, drawing the doors open for them to enter. The killing intent that came from the room was thick enough to taste and in another situation might have put Xie Lian on edge, but in this case he knew exactly what to expect and why exactly it felt this way.

Once inside, all Xie Lian could do was stare. It was the most magnificent space he had ever seen, rivalled only by the armoury of Jun Wu himself! The bedroom and the bathing chamber and the gardens were all stunning, of course, but it was only a space like this that truly made Xie Lian feel as if his blood were boiling. He couldn't resist a moment longer, he stepped away from Hua Cheng and bounded into the room, eager to look at everything at once.

"Gege approves?" Hua Cheng asked, following after.

"I do, I do! May… may I touch?"

"As gege likes."

And then there was really no holding him back. Xie Lian flitted around the room, going towards whatever caught his eye in the moment. He knew he would pay the price later, letting his attention get pulled so shamelessly in all directions at once, but he couldn't resist. He felt the weave of different whips, admired the ornamentation of shields, felt the heft of different spears, and examined sword after sword after sword. And no matter which weapon Xie Lian asked about, Hua Cheng had a story to go with it, either information about its origins or a tale about how he had acquired it.

Any time Xie Lian began to tire, or grow too dizzy to keep up his frantic pace, he would brace himself against a wall and hold out some weapon or another, and insist to hear all about it, to learn what had created it or how it had come to be here or what special properties it possessed.

Xie Lian thought there was definite amusement in Hua Cheng's voice as he responded to Xie Lian's unrestrained excitement, but he was too focused on the magnificent collection to pay it any mind.

It was in this way that they spent one sichen and then another within the armoury.

They didn't stop until Xie Lian had to give in to his flagging energy. He made to sit down on the floor next to a shelf, but Hua Cheng's hands were suddenly on his elbow and he was being redirected to sit on top of a trunk that was stuffed full of various flails. It was a challenge to sit on it rather than toss the lid open and explore what had been stored in it so carelessly.

All Xie Lian could do was curse his foolish head for putting a hold to the fun, but it really was throbbing. He could see and process things much better than he had with the nail, but it really did seem that too much at once overwhelmed him, just as the garden's bright colours had. In here, where he really, truly wanted to see and touch everything at once, it was inevitable that he would be left with a pounding headache. His darting back and forth from one thing to the next had certainly not helped his overall queasiness either. He was grateful to have Hua Cheng sitting next to him, because he didn't seem to mind when Xie Lian leant against him like a pillow with his eyes closed.

"Shall I call for lunch?" Hua Cheng asked. "I was thinking that this seemed like the right atmosphere for fried meats, perhaps, unless gege has some other preference?"

Sitting within mighty, stone walls, surrounded by some of the finest weapons ever forged while eating fried meats and whatever side dishes might be included really did sound like the best possible way to spend an afternoon. Xie Lian was tempted to say yes, because he couldn't remember the last time he had experienced something so perfect or indulgent, but his uneasy stomach stalled him.

If they called for food now, all of his would certainly be wasted.

Why couldn't he have had more sense and paced himself? He knew better than this.

Sighing, he said, "Could we wait a little longer before eating?"

"Of course," said Hua Cheng easily. "Whatever gege likes." Rather than leave it there though, like Xie Lian had hoped, he could practically feel Hua Cheng's calculating look as he carefully asked, "Is your head hurting?"

Too perceptive by half! Not that Xie Lian was terribly subtle, he supposed. What else would make him stop exploring the armoury but a throbbing head and upset stomach? Hua Cheng must be getting very used to Xie Lian's weight when he was feeling dizzy.

"No," Xie Lian lied, in case that would mean an end of this visit.

Hua Cheng huffed, clearly not believing a word, but he didn't argue. "The armoury, do you like it?" he asked instead.

"I do!"

"Do you like it a lot?"

"Very much!"

"Has gege found anything that he particularly fancies?"

Where could Xie Lian even begin? Hua Cheng's collection was surely unmatched, and Xie Lian could hardly slight a single piece in here! "All of them! They're all masterpieces!"

Hua Cheng grinned, dark eyes creasing, and he seemed about to say something when they were interrupted by the heavy, reverberating grind of the door. Xie Lian had so wholly forgotten about the rest of the world, that it was a little startling to then hear another voice among the shelves and racks of beautiful weapons.

"Chengzhu?"

Hua Cheng didn't seem so much startled as just plain murderous at the interruption.

"What?" he snapped.

Yin Yu didn't back down, but he did stand straighter. Xie Lian could only sympathise for him; he must have had to hunt all over to find them hidden in here so whatever he had to say was probably important.

"I came to ensure that Chengzhu remembers that his meeting with Black Water Sinks Ships is approaching. Usually you like to prepare before the appointed time…"

Hua Cheng opened his mouth to argue, before his teeth clicked sharply shut and he cursed under his breath. It was only then that Xie Lian remembered the financial report Hua Cheng had been going over, and his remark that he had a meeting later today. He had mentioned wanting to reschedule, but of course then Xie Lian had monopolised his time and he never would have had a chance to act on that thought.

"Forget him, I'll tell him to get lost," said Hua Cheng, and he raised his hand to his temple as if to speak into a private array.

Xie Lian reached out to grab his wrist and pull his hand down. The hand went easily, tensing briefly as if startled by the touch but then curling around Xie Lian's.

"Don't do that!"

"Gege…"

"You had a prior arrangement, you should keep it," Xie Lian scolded.

Hua Cheng pouted. "I'd rather play with gege."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Didn't your parents ever teach you to prioritise work over play, San Lang?"

"No, that's why I'm a Ghost King," he said serenely. "I don't have a single virtue. I only know vice."

And this alleged vice just happened to be caring for an invalid whom he had saved from his own gambling hall? Hua Cheng was hopelessly insincere.

"Besides," continued Hua Cheng, "I know my priorities. Black Water doesn't factor into them."

"Isn't he your fellow Ghost King? San Lang, it would be irresponsible not to maintain good relations between kings. In those situations, it's the common people who suffer. My head hurts anyway, I had better return to the room and rest before we come back here."

"So gege's head does hurt. Let this one come with you and—"

"No, no, absolutely not! I've already taken up too much of your time, you've spent most of the past few days with me! You need to run your city and I need to rest. Yin Yu, please take San Lang to his meeting, I can return to my room on my own."

Hua Cheng gave Yin Yu a warning look that very clearly told him that while he may be willing to play with Xie Lian, he had no such tolerance for his assistant overstepping. Xie Lian paid it no mind, focused instead on getting himself back to his feet despite the splinter-sharp stabbing in his head which had continued to build since sitting down.

"You're sure you're okay, gege?"

"Yes, yes! Just give me a butterfly so I don't get lost?"

Hua Cheng did as asked, and so the two of them split away from each other — Xie Lian returning to his rooms, and Hua Cheng disappearing further into the manor with Yin Yu, presumably to some sort of office or receiving room. Xie Lian idly wondered what the other Ghost King must be like, and whether he and Hua Cheng were friends. It might be an interesting thing to meet another Ghost King since he got along so well with this one, but he ultimately discarded the idea. He wasn't sure he wanted to run across someone he wasn't already familiar with, not just yet. Certainly not one that was powerful enough to be called a Calamity or to be spoken of in the same breath as White No-Face.

In any case, a rest would do his head good.

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A shadow slid through Paradise Manor. There were plenty of shadows throughout the sprawling estate, but this one didn't move with the sun, and when it reached a door it churned, spread thin, and slid beneath it like a puddle of dark water. Only once it was on the other side did the shadow begin to rise and reshape itself — though what stepped out didn't

look that much different from the pooling shadow, not with its lank, hanging hair or trailing, black robes.

It surveyed the hall it was in with sharp, sunken eyes, like twin coins that shone from the depths of some fathomless shipwreck. Then the figure sighed and stretched the kinks out of its back.

These 'financial meetings' of Crimson Rain's were, possibly, one of He Xuan's least favourite obligations, which was saying a lot given how much time he spent in the Heavenly Realm acting as ersatz Earth Master and part-time babysitter to a certain Wind Master.

Unfortunately he needed Hua Cheng. Which meant tolerating his needy, controlling, obnoxious ass. Which meant sitting in these stupid meetings while Hua Cheng batted at him like a cat with a piece of string. Every so often they did actually discuss useful things, or plan something of relevance, but it did not, in He Xuan's opinion, balance the scales.

So in the last hundred years or so, He Xuan had begun to make his own fun.

It had all started over an argument about how Hua Cheng staffed his manor. Which was to say: he didn't. This may be hypocritical, as Hua Cheng had testily pointed out, but He Xuan actively discouraged anyone from arriving at Black Water Island — he had bone dragons for that, and an entire sea that swallowed boats as soon as they crossed into his waters. He wasn't dragging people to his house to rub their debts in their faces.

Hua Cheng, however, was. Which meant every year or so He Xuan would find himself outside Paradise Manor, impatiently waiting for *someone* to open the damn doors and let him get this over with. No matter how you framed it there was something inherently demeaning about being forced to cool your heels at your creditor's door and Yin Yu was never prompt about answering. He Xuan was certain that Hua Cheng had given him explicit instructions to make He Xuan stand around and look like an idiot before deigning to let him enter.

So at some point in the last century, He Xuan had simply… stopped doing that. He was a Calamity after all. He was no Crimson Rain Sought Flower, but he was capable enough to play the entire heavenly court like a guqin. A little breaking and entering was like swapping that out for a two-stringed fiddle. It was an easy thing to let his corporeal body dissolve and to slither soundlessly into the manor, even if that wasn't a shape he could sustain for long out of water.

Once he was inside, the race was on.

(Not, of course, that this was a game. They were both ancient, vengeful Ghost Kings. They were business partners. They did not play games. But if they did, He Xuan was determined to win.)

The really important thing to know was how much all of this pissed off Hua Cheng. It wasn't like he didn't trounce through He Xuan's domain whenever he felt like it, but he really hated it when He Xuan suddenly appeared at his study door like a shadow as if he wasn't the one calling these shitty meetings to begin with. And the closer he got to Hua Cheng before he realised He Xuan was already in the manor, the angrier he got.

(One may argue that having your creditor in a bad mood before discussing your debt was unproductive, but in his experience Hua Cheng in any sort of mood besides "moping about a dead god" was preferable. Even a manor this ostentatious could only support so much despondency and He Xuan brought his own.)

So the trick was to find Hua Cheng in this stupid, sprawling manor before he twigged, which was easier said than done. Not even accounting for the stupid transportation arrays the lunatic had designed into various doorways around the place, there were enough other dangers waiting to catch even the most calculating mind off guard. He had to move quickly and carefully if he wanted a chance of catching Hua Cheng before some warning went off and he sniffed He Xuan out.

With that in mind, he didn't hesitate to begin gliding on silent feet down the first hallway he saw, determined to keep to the shadows, keep moving, and try to work out where the bastard was hiding himself away these days. Moping over some half-finished statue, probably. And he thought He Xuan had a problem.

He made it through an (unwarded) door and another two halls before he ran into someone.

Well, not so literally, but it was still startling to see. He didn't think he had ever come across another body in this manor besides for Crimson Rain and Yin Yu, so he slowed himself more and ensured his steps were silent — a water-slick glide across the floor, his legs only partially corporeal beneath his robes as he crept forward.

He Xuan couldn't make out much of this figure, besides the fact that he had long hair and wore plain, white robes. He was walking away from He Xuan with one hand trailing on the wall next to him, making his gait seem strange and unnatural. He seemed largely unremarkable. An assistant, like Yin Yu? A Waxing Moon Officer to balance his Waning Moon Officer? Or a petty servant? Impossible to tell. The real question was whether He Xuan was better off approaching or avoiding the figure.

If he could get a servant to tell him where Hua Cheng was hiding in this maze, it would improve his odds of catching him unaware by a lot. But on the other hand, he had tried that once with Yin Yu and had been called out immediately through the communication array, the snitch. It had been one of his worst performances and Hua Cheng had been unbearably smug that entire meeting.

But there was no reason for Hua Cheng to have shared his verbal password with every random ghost that might enter his house. It could be worth the risk. If he took this person by surprise and didn't give him time to think beyond the Supreme-rank ghost suddenly appearing in his face, then he might just spit out what He Xuan wanted to know before realising he shouldn't.

Also, it would be entertaining to get to actually be a terrifying, vengeful Devastation for a moment or two after being forced to wear a mask for so long in the Heavenly Capital — even if that just meant scaring inconsequential servants and minor ghosts.

So he struck. On half-liquid feet he glided down the hallway, as silent and unstoppable as the tide, hand already reaching out to grab a shoulder and—

And then very abruptly he was airborne.

And then colliding quite heavily against a door.

Which shattered into pieces and sent He Xuan crashing to the floor before he had even really made sense of what the *fuck* had just happened.

He Xuan wasn't entirely sure where he had miscalculated, but as he lay in a pile of splinters and stared up at the ceiling of one of Hua Cheng's gaudy rooms, he was forced to acknowledge that he clearly had.

Look, he was no martial god. Being stuck in Heaven, forced to listen to those idiots constantly measuring their dicks, he could be very certain of that. He was, at best, an elemental force. At his heart, he was a scholar.

But he was still a fucking Ghost King so what the fuck had just happened?

He didn't get a chance to *ask* though because suddenly one of Crimson Rain's butterflies was in his face, and if He Xuan was feeling annoyed about the whole thing it was nothing compared to what this wretched, little ball of malice was feeling.

"Ow! Enough! Fuck, Crimson Rain, give it a rest!" he snarled, trying to swat it away as it surged at him with wings like razor blades that were intent on cutting and gouging his skin.

"Sorry, I'm sorry!" cried a voice above him, and suddenly a pair of hands were cupping themselves around that evil, flying butcher's knife.

Rather than immediately mutilating the fingers caging it though, the butterfly settled down and He Xuan was left looking up at the wide-eyed, concerned face of the white-robed man. At this distance, he could see that the robes he wore were not, in fact, plain, but rather finely tailored and elegantly embroidered.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I didn't notice your approach at all, I just reacted! I didn't mean to throw you so hard, I'm sorry."

'Didn't notice' — he wasn't meant to have noticed anything! He Xuan had been intentionally hiding his aura! Hadn't even been walking! So how the fuck had he known to strike back like that *at all* ?

"Don't apologise to that trash, gege. Just toss him through a wall next."

He Xuan groaned, and sat up.

The nearest person in the hall was, of course, the man in white who at this range was very clearly not a ghost. He was breathing, for one, and swallowing thickly as if he was feeling ill or nervous or something. Which didn't explain much, because he definitely wasn't a god either — Ming Yi wasn't what you would call "social" but he had enough clones stationed around the Heavenly Realm to be at least passingly familiar with all the other gods — but no Middle Court Official or human should be about to toss him around like a pile of rags.

The second person in the hall was, naturally, Crimson Rain Sought Flower. Because of course he turned up as soon as He Xuan had just gotten humiliated. Except Hua Cheng didn't look like he was here to gloat.

He looked, as it happened, completely furious. And not "annoyed that He Xuan had broken into Paradise Manor again" furious. More like "destroy a god's entire following base in a single night" furious. There was still a singular butterfly sitting harmlessly in the man's hands, but a whole new cloud had swarmed around Hua Cheng's head and they were looking much less tame.

He Xuan baulked and rapidly reevaluated the situation. After that throw, he had expected a smug Hua Cheng, or perhaps a pissy one. Probably one who would be eager to add to his debt over this. He had not expected to be faced with the sort of demon that gave gods nightmares. Hua Cheng examined him with eyes like ice chips, before turning away entirely to focus on the white-robed man, reaching out to take an elbow and pull him close.

And the white-robed man went, without the slightest trepidation of being handled by a Calamity. In fact, he leaned easily against Hua Cheng's chest, eyes closed, like it was natural. Even more bizarrely, Hua Cheng stood there and allowed it.

What was going on here?

"Gege, are you alright?" Hua Cheng murmured.

Gege? Hua Cheng, an eight hundred year old entity of pure resentment, was calling someone *gege* ?

"Yes, yes, just taken by surprise," the man said, and he had the audacity to grimace as if he were embarrassed about the whole thing. Like throwing a Ghost King through a door was a silly mistake that could happen to anyone. The man opened one eye a sliver, to focus back on He Xuan. "I'm afraid I was a little jumpy. I am sorry."

Hua Cheng's attention also returned to He Xuan, but it was with none of the gentleness of his companion. "You better have a good reason to be here, Black Water."

This was just too much.

"You're the one who called this meeting!"

"Did I call on you to enter my home without permission or assault my guests?" said Hua Cheng with a deadly stillness, and his cursed sabre rattled in fierce agreement.

He Xuan wanted to snarl something back, but he was saved from saying something potentially suicidal by the man in white who covered his face with his free hand — the one that wasn't clinging so shamelessly to Hua Cheng — and groaned.

"You must be Lord Black Water Sinks Ships. Really, I am very sorry. San Lan was going to meet with you, please don't let me get in the way. This was really all just a misunderstanding."

" *San Lang?* " He Xuan repeated incredulously, but was ignored.

"No misunderstanding, gege; I understand this broke deadbeat perfectly well and you did the best thing. Better to toss out trash like this."

"Can we just get on with it?" He Xuan grumbled, forcefully looking away from the two of them to focus on brushing wood chips from his robes instead. If he wasn't going to be told anything, he would rather finish things up as quickly as possible and get the fuck away. He'd had more than enough of his fellow Calamity for the day. Or the year. Possibly the decade.

"Be more grateful that gege is requesting clemency," Hua Cheng warned, voice immediately dropping back into something dark and deadly. "I should quarter you and feed you to your own fish for daring to touch him."

As if he had even gotten close to touching. The only touching involved had been when this man had grabbed his wrist and tossed him about like a fish on a line.

"And who exactly *is* this 'gege'?" He Xuan demanded, because he hadn't been dispersed yet so he may as well keep going and hope this wasn't about to become some domain flattening battle between Supremes any time soon. Because seriously, this was actually getting a little concerning. Hua Cheng couldn't be called friendly on a good day, never mind whatever this simpering was — had the idiot gotten himself cursed or something when He Xuan hadn't been looking?

Hua Cheng immediately bristled at his tone, but the man in white just took a step away from Hua Cheng and dipped into a little bow. A shallow one, but given how he seemed to sway unsteadily afterwards, perhaps it was the best he could manage. How could someone who looked so sickly have done what he had done?

"Pardon my manners. My family name is Xie, and my given name is Lian."

No way.

No fucking way.

Well, at least he knew that Crimson Rain wasn't cursed and that nothing about this was actually out of character.

It was just every other thing about it that was insane.

"You found your fucking god and didn't think to mention it?" he snapped. He did have ongoing orders to keep his ears open for any rumours related to the Laughingstock God after all. How much time and effort would he have wasted before Hua Cheng thought to share this rather significant update?

"Your…?" Xie Lian started to say, brow creasing slightly, and Hua Cheng's back suddenly shot up straight, tense.

He Xuan looked between them, briefly confused, before realisation struck.

Have you not told him you've been moping around after him for eight hundred years? he asked through the array. *How the fuck did you even get him here? How did you get him to call you 'San Lang'?*

If you say a single thing, Black Water, I will make you wish I had just fed you to your fish, said Hua Cheng, before adding out loud, "Gege, if you'll excuse this one, I believe I have a meeting to conduct."

No words in any of the three realms have ever been spoken with such frigid threat and resentment as those ones. This would be a very long meeting.

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"So he knows I'm a god," Xie Lian mused from where he lay on the bed to the butterflies that fluttered overhead.

Currently he had the window shut, the room softened into a false twilight, while he tried to ease the pounding in his head. What had been a lone fissure of pain in the armoury had since spread like shattered pottery to encompass the whole of his brain, like a foot was stamping repeatedly onto the already broken shards until they were rendered into something so sharp and fractured that they could never again be made whole. With each new throb and crack Xie Lian felt like he was about to slip and fall through reality, drop into somewhere far away from the soft bed in which he was trying to curl defensively.

He had known he had been negligent with his fragile health even as he had left the armoury. Somehow, the moment he was away from Hua Cheng and his eagerness and those wonderful weapons, the pain had spiked. Walking had been a labour that had made it feel like the top of his head was threatening to slide away from the bottom if he moved too quickly, and he couldn't take more than a few steps at a time without needing to pause.

As it was, he had expected to make a very pathetic limp back to his room, collapse in the bed, and hopefully sleep off the discomfort before Hua Cheng finished with his meeting. At that point, he had still held the optimistic hope that after a rest he would feel well enough to return to the armoury in the evening.

But then there had been a person. Or rather, the presence of a person *right there* , at his back, and they had been reaching for him. For his head. It was every horrible fear made real, and Xie Lian had thought, for a moment, that he would simply collapse then and there, too afraid to think, to run, to even scream.

In that moment, there had been no question in his throbbing mind: the man had gotten in, somehow, and he was going to put the nail back where it belonged. So Xie Lian had let his body react without a further thought beyond the burning, choking fear — he had grabbed the person reaching for him and had thrown him as far away as possible.

It was only lifetimes' worth of practice that had kept him from falling himself as the momentum had made his entire vision turn briefly in on itself, whiting out the edges in sharp, explosive bursts. As it was, he had staggered and barely kept upright, especially when the deafening sound of splintering wood had drilled into his ears, and the stress had clawed into

his body, forcing muscles into rigid knots as his heart beat a wild staccato, waiting for what was going to happen next.

(*—waiting for the man to stand. To be furious. To grab him by his filthy, knotted hair, to force him to his knees, to the floor, to hit and hit and break the world apart into feathers on the wind, to destroy this beautiful dream and leave him with nothing to do but claw back to awareness in that hut and—*)

And of course none of that had happened. Instead, it had only been him, in an empty hall, with a head that had felt like it had been turned inside out and which had been hurting so much he had hardly even been able to see beyond light and pain. He had been standing there with (a dying butterfly in his hands, with kind San Lang kicked brutally to the floor, with) a stranger who hadn't known better lying in a wreckage of wood that had spread around him like broken wings.

The guilt had surged almost stronger than the pain and completely swallowed the misplaced fear.

Xie Lian had stumbled over, apologies tripping over his tongue even as he tried to catch the butterfly that seemed intent on proving to Xie Lian that Hua Cheng hadn't lied when he had called them weapons.

He had spiralled. Possibly literally. Nothing was steady, it was all twisting around him like the hall had turned into a massive snake. He could barely make out the face in front of him or the words that were being spoken and he thought he was going to die except he couldn't, and didn't, mostly because between one breath and the next Hua Cheng had suddenly appeared.

The moment the hand had appeared at his elbow, and his face had been guided against a familiar, red shoulder everything had stilled. His head still throbbed, his gut still churned, guilt still gnawed at his bones, but the hall was still and his vision was red and he could breathe again. He should have felt guiltier about taking that comfort after causing such a mess, but he had only been grateful.

(So much for encouraging Hua Cheng to keep good relations with his fellow Ghost King, because Hua Cheng had looked the angriest that Xie Lian had ever seen him. Then again, he supposed anyone would be angry to have their house invaded without permission.)

(If Black Water Sinks Ships could sneak in, then who was to say that someone else couldn't? Who was to say the man couldn't?)

Xie Lian sighed and pressed his face more firmly against the pillow, dismissing the thought. The differences between a high-ranked ghost and a human labourer were comical. Just because something was true for one, did not make it true for the other. Xie Lian was safe, and doubting that was irrational.

(It still made him shiver and want to keep an eye cracked in order to watch the bedroom door. Just in case. It didn't have to be the man after all, it could be anyone. Anyone that wanted a target who was weak and easy and *already broken in, and—*)

And Hua Cheng knew he was a god. Had possibly been looking for him, if Lord Black Water was to be believed. Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise. Hua Cheng was incredibly well-read, was familiar with even ancient topics, and enjoyed collecting interesting things. Was it so surprising that someone like him would have come across Xie Lian's name, one of the Four Famous Tales, and would have been amused by a twice-banished joke among the Heavens?

Maybe Hua Cheng really had won him as an interesting trinket. It might explain all the time he had spent with him over the last few days. After all, who didn't enjoy playing with a new toy? And surely a laughingstock was bound to be entertaining?

That thought made his stomach ache and he threw an arm across his eyes to better block out the light which was trying to tunnel beneath his eyelids directly into his skull.

It wasn't so shocking though. Hadn't he been wondering about what motivated Hua Cheng to not only saving him but to put so much effort into his recovery? This wasn't even a bad way to spend one's time. If this was how a favoured oddity was treated, it was really quite pleasant, a definite step up from how things had been before. And with any luck (ha) when Hua Cheng's interests drifted elsewhere he would let Xie Lian go on his way rather than… anything else.

Nerves prickled. Not in any way he wanted to define, because he really would feel too guilty about thinking poorly of Hua Cheng after he had been nothing but kind and considerate, but they were impossible to ignore. He could just leave, he supposed. Slip out the bedroom window, scale the wall around the estate, break through any wards, and then find a way out of Ghost City. His hands weren't bound anymore. There was no nail to arrest his feet or kill his thoughts. Nothing was stopping from leaving.

Except that he really didn't want to leave without saying goodbye.

(Except that he really didn't want to leave.)

What a mess, and his head hurt too much to sort through it all now. He really wished he had just let Hua Cheng cancel his meeting so they could have kept playing in the armoury and he could have stayed pleasantly ignorant for a while longer. He was used to losing things, but it didn't stop him from wanting to hold them tighter.

The knock at the door was less a knock and more the softest brush of knuckle against wood. If the room wasn't already perfectly silent, Xie Lian would never have heard it.

He made an acknowledging sound, because words felt beyond him right now. His head hurt too much and the entire world felt as if it might break like ice underfoot and plunge him into something dark and frozen if he wasn't careful.

The door opened. He heard the faint jingle of the silver that decorated Hua Cheng's boots.

"Gege?" Hua Cheng whispered, just a faint stir of air.

"Mm."

"Headache?" he guessed.

"Mm."

"I'll leave."

"Nng."

The one thing he desperately didn't want was that. If anyone could pick him up and lift him from the breaking ice underfoot, it was Hua Cheng. Maybe that wasn't fair of him, to want so much after such a short period of time, but the pain and the stress and the confusion of it all was pushing most of his moderation to the side. All he knew at the moment was what hurt and what might hurt less. Hua Cheng, over the past few days, somehow always seemed to make things to hurt less, so as long as he could selfishly cling to him, he wanted to. He held up his free arm and made a grabbing gesture.

There was silence, hesitation, and then the swish of fabric and tinkle of silver before the side of the bed dipped and a weight appeared on the blankets next to him. Xie Lian didn't open his eyes but turned his face towards it, so it was pressed against Hua Cheng's leg. That helped block out the light.

Another hesitation, and then there was a hand in his hair, stroking feather light against his temple. Xie Lian sighed. Hua Cheng's skin was so cold, and it felt wonderful.

"If gege wants, I'll disperse him," Hua Cheng whispered.

"Mn. Don't."

Silence again, and Xie Lian didn't exactly sleep because his head hurt too much, and all he could feel was the no-longer-there nail being driven in and out of his skull like a piston, like a man's hips knocking ruthlessly against his thighs, like—

A bitter taste in his mouth. He swallowed around it and pressed his face more firmly against Hua Cheng's leg, tossing one arm across his lap so he could lie closer. He tried to imagine the taste of copper instead but that wasn't much better.

He tried to imagine tea and steamed buns.

He was definitely poor company as afternoon faded to evening, as he faded in and out of awareness in a way that he hadn't since he had become Hua Cheng's possession rather than the man's. Somehow it hurt worse, returning to it after having such a pleasant break. Three days of luxury and care was apparently all it took to strip his defences. He wondered if there were other things that would hurt worse to return to, after being given time to heal from them.

Even Xie Lian was bored and annoyed with being stuck in bed like this. It must be miserable for Hua Cheng, who had said he didn't even like to sit still when he could help it. And yet here he was, trapped under Xie Lian's arm while he did nothing remotely entertaining.

"Will gege eat?" Hua Cheng asked at one point, some indefinite amount of time later.

The table was so far away. He couldn't move. He couldn't get up and move to it.

He could be moved. He didn't want to be moved. He didn't want his smooth, clean hair to be grabbed. He didn't want to touch the hard floor when he had such a soft bed.

"Please don't," he whispered into Hua Cheng's thigh. If tears were forming, it was a secret held between Xie Lian and the fabric of Hua Cheng's robes.

Hua Cheng kept stroking his hair and making soothing noises. "I won't," he promised. "I won't do anything gege doesn't want. You're safe. You're safe. I won't let anyone touch you."

Xie Lian clung tighter, just in case he was going to include himself in that category and leave Xie Lian entirely alone in the dark. But he made no effort to leave.

"Will gege eat if I feed him?" Hua Cheng asked, later enough that the room had grown dark around them. "You don't need to move. Just a little?"

Not moving was… if he didn't need to move, that should be okay. He didn't feel hungry, and his mouth tasted bitter, but he thought he could eat. Hua Cheng wanted him to eat. It might be good to eat. He nodded, minutely.

Hua Cheng shifted slightly, leg moving away from Xie Lian's face and he moaned at the loss.

"Gege. Food."

Xie Lian cracked a single eye open. His vision seemed to blur, even while lying down like this. Something was being held in front of his mouth and for a moment he was certain he would throw up. Except it was nothing but a dried jujube fruit. Those were supposed to be good for stress, for relaxing the body, weren't they?

All he had to do was open his mouth and Hua Cheng fed it to him. It was so overwhelmingly indulgent that it made tears prickle more fiercely in his eyes as he carefully chewed the sweet flesh of the fruit. He felt like a pampered thing. Like a spoiled prince. He felt unworthy of this care, when there was no good reason for it. He wasn't injured. He had overexerted himself in the most foolish way, and had then worked himself up by attacking Hua Cheng's business partner. His teeth met the hard stone at the centre of the fruit. How pathetic he was.

"Gege, I'll take the pit."

It was all too much. "I'm sorry," he said, because he didn't have the energy to explain any of the other thoughts that were crashing together and apart like the beads on a rattle drum.

"It's only a pit, gege, it's fine."

It was only a pit. It was more than a pit. Hua Cheng was deliberately misunderstanding him and he was so grateful for that because if he tried to fit anything else into words the drum in his brain would surely split.

He spat the pit into Hua Cheng's waiting hand and Hua Cheng just removed it. Tossed it into a bowl, presumably, where it rattled, and then another fruit was brought to Xie Lian's lips. Like it was a simple thing.

Xie Lian ate every fruit he was given, and Hua Cheng removed every pit.

"Would gege like silence, or would you like me to read?"

If he was a trinket, to be won or discarded, then Hua Cheng really was the best person to belong to. He didn't know what sort of luck he must have scraped together to wind up here.

"Read. Please."

And he did. Xie Lian barely absorbed a word, but it gave a single thing for his poor brain to focus on and let him press everything else away until it was only him and this soft bed and Hua Cheng's soft leg and his soft voice.

Eventually he fell asleep.

Miraculously, he didn't dream a single thing that night. Whenever the pain or a dark thought began to pull him under, his head seemed to breach long enough to hear a murmuring voice above him and the darkness dimmed a little until he eased back into sleep once more.

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Chapter End Notes

A brief interlude with He Xuan! Because for some reason I find throwing Xie Lian at him like some sort of eldritch horror the *funniest* possible thing, but that might just be a testament to my own piss poor sense of humour. Hua Cheng, Feng Xin, Mu Qing... they're all prepared for a certain level of weird around Xie Lian. He Xuan, who has only heard stories from Hua Cheng, is so unprepared for exactly how fucking bizarre Xie Lian is and I think that's magical. That's what you get for touching without permission, He Xuan, I hope you learnt a lesson!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I meant to get this out earlier but somehow it just kept creeping longer and longer and there was no better spot to break things up so it made editting a bit of an ordeal...

When Xie Lian woke, it was with a head that was clear and refreshed, like a spring morning after a rainstorm.

He also woke up with his face pressed against a pillow that wasn't a pillow, which was slightly confusing until he, rather embarrassingly, remembered how exactly he had fallen asleep last night. Hua Cheng really had sat here next to him on the bed the whole night. Xie Lian moved back, intended to apologise for keeping him, but was instead startled into silence.

Hua Cheng still sat there, but rather than reading or doing some other hobby to pass the time, his head was tipped back, mouth a little slack, and clearly fast asleep. Xie Lian sat up carefully so that he was no longer lying plastered to Hua Cheng's leg, and noticed the book from last night sitting on the bed next to him, beside a bowl of discarded fruit pits. Well, it was his turn to sit and let Hua Cheng sleep it would appear. Feeling unnecessarily satisfied by this, he reached over for the book and settled in next to the slumped Hua Cheng to read what he had mostly dozed through the night before.

It wasn't long before Hua Cheng began to stir.

"Good morning, San Lang," he said, feeling oddly pleased that he got to be the one to say it this time.

Hua Cheng went from stirring to wide awake in an instance, and given how they were sitting — Hua Cheng propped against the headboard of the bed and Xie Lian next to him with his book — it meant he really did wake with his face inches from Xie Lian's. Hua Cheng froze entirely, which coming from a ghost was a rather impressive sight: he may as well have been carved from stone, like some divine statue! And then he blinked and seemed to come to life once more.

"Good morning, gege," he said, a little weakly.

"I knew ghosts could sleep," Xie Lian said with a grin.

"Yes, gege," said Hua Cheng.

"Do you feel less cranky?"

"Yes, gege," said Hua Cheng, who seemed to be leaning on agreement until his brain woke up.

"It's too bad I didn't wake up earlier, or I could be the one getting you breakfast as well."

More blinking. "...Do you want to make breakfast?"

"Mm, I would, if it's for San Lang. I cook for myself sometimes, but I haven't cooked for anyone else in ages."

"...Then I'll show you to the kitchen," Hua Cheng said, scrambling towards the edge of the bed, creating a chasm of space between them.

Xie Lian frowned at this as he followed at his own, more sedate pace, moving tentatively in case the migraine from yesterday was simply lying in wait to strike again. Movement brought nothing more than the usual bought of dizziness so he was able to stagger over to the privacy screen while Hua Cheng seemed to flap around the room like one of his butterflies, asking if Xie Lian wanted him to fetch any robe in particular.

Xie Lian did not, and was happy to put on whatever Hua Cheng passed him. They were much more Hua Cheng's robes than his, so why shouldn't he choose, especially if it made him happy? Xie Lian would like Hua Cheng to be happy, and this morning he seemed… unsettled. Not unhappy, per se, but not as confident and content as he had been yesterday. Was it from the fight he'd had with Lord Black Water? Or restlessness from being kept trapped to the bed by Xie Lian for so long? Or discomfort from having been caught sleeping when he had come out and said he rarely slept? Perhaps it felt like an invasion of privacy, and he preferred not to be so close to someone like that.

Or perhaps it was because Xie Lian now knew that Hua Cheng had intentionally been trying to collect him? Obviously Hua Cheng had skirted around the details, about why he had gone to the trouble of saving Xie Lian. Did he think Xie Lian would object if he knew his true purpose?

There was no reason for Hua Cheng to worry about such a thing. He was a kind man, and had been more than generous. In fact, Xie Lian truly couldn't remember the last time he had had so much fun, even allowing for the weakness and headaches!

So once he had dressed himself in the robes selected for him, he came out and reached for Hua Cheng's arm without hesitation, though he kept a close eye on his reaction.

Rather than look uncomfortable in any way — as he might have if the problem was related to having Xie Lian pressed so close to him all night — he seemed immediately more at ease under Xie Lian's hands. Less unsettled. Promising; Xie Lian really didn't want to have to give up this indulgence.

"Ready?" Hua Cheng asked, and when Xie Lian nodded he began to lead them on the slow walk to a new part of the manor.

As they walked, Xie Lian decided it would probably be better to get things out in the open. "San Lang, you're upset about last night?"

Almost imperceptibly, the arm under his stiffened.

"Of course. Black Water's behaviour was unacceptable. As was this lowly one's."

Xie Lian blinked. That… wasn't the response he had expected. Well, his anger at Lord Black Water wasn't a surprise, perhaps, but what of his actions? Admittedly the headache had been bad enough to make it a little hard to track things, but what had Hua Cheng done besides swoop in and save him? Surely none of his actions were remotely questionable!

"San Lang didn't do anything."

"I know." Hua Cheng spoke with such acid that it was amazing it didn't burn right through his tongue. "I knew we had a meeting, and I know what he's like. I should have never let him in. I shouldn't have even let him near the city. I shouldn't have left you alone with him skulking around. I shouldn't have left you to go to your rooms alone when you could hardly walk, and I shouldn't have let that wretched fish leave here with his ashes intact."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What a proclamation! "San Lang! None of that is right! Didn't I insist you go to your meeting and that I went back alone? Even I didn't know how bad my headache was until I—" *was away from you* , was probably a bit too needy and pitiful to voice out loud, even Xie Lian didn't have the face for that… "—was already on my way. And not only did you appear as soon as something was wrong, but you were protecting me that whole time with the butterfly, weren't you? San Lang was remiss in nothing; if anything you were once again too accommodating!"

Hua Cheng ducked his head but gave no other response. Xie Lian couldn't help but feel like he wanted to argue but was holding himself back. Eventually Xie Lian nudged at him a little with his elbow, trying to lighten the mood.

At first it was like nudging stone, but then Hua Cheng thawed and gently jostled him back, knocking their shoulders together.

"If gege had wanted to spar, we should have gone back to the armoury," he teased.

"Excellent! I was going to ask if we could!"

This made Hua Cheng look at him fully, eyebrows raised. "...Is that a good idea?"

"En!"

"...Breakfast first."

"Of course," Xie Lian agreed placatingly, because he really was eager to cook for Hua Cheng. It would be the first tangible, useful thing he had done since Hua Cheng had scooped him up from the floor of the Gambler's Den.

After walking a little further, Hua Cheng hesitated and added, "About what Black Water said last night…"

"Think no more of it!" Xie Lian said hastily, not wanting to ruin the good mood he had been coaxing Hua Cheng into. "Nothing has to change, right?"

Hua Cheng let out a soft breath, and a little more tension drained away. "Of course not, gege."

Xie Lian beamed, and let himself be led the rest of the way into the kitchen.

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Hua Cheng kept a wary eye on Xie Lian as he explored the kitchen, using the counters as support as he poked into the cupboards and larders, investigating what Hua Cheng had to work with.

He wasn't sure what he had expected this morning after everything that had happened yesterday, but it hadn't been for Xie Lian to be quite this chipper. He had obviously been uncomfortable when they had finished in the armoury, much like he had been after the gardens the day before, but that had been before Black Water had decided to attack his god in his own home.

He could kill Black Water. He should have. Would consider fixing that, if His Highness hadn't explicitly told him not to last night.

By the time his butterfly had alerted him, the damage had already been done. Xie Lian had been taut and trembling when he had collapsed against Hua Cheng's side, eyes already squeezing shut against the onslaught, much as he did when the agony in his head was overwhelming everything else. When Xie Lian had reached blindly out and clenched a fist into his robes, he had felt the tremors running through it and he had wanted to grab Xie Lian and whisk him away and demand to know what was wrong, if it was pain, if it was fear — because it was bad enough that Black Water had caused his god *pain* but if he had *scared Xie Lian* after the effort Hua Cheng had been going to to make him feel safe, he was going to fillet him like a fucking tuna and pull his bones out one by one.

And despite all that, His Highness had apologised as if *he* hadn't been the one who had just been attacked, and had tried to smooth things over, and then Black Water had… he had said…

When Hua Cheng had finally returned from his "meeting" with Black Water, he had been terrified of being turned away entirely. That His Highness would be disgusted by the depth of Hua Cheng's attentions, or by the evidence of how much Hua Cheng had failed despite his pitiful attempts at worship — or worse, that he would be scared that Hua Cheng's devotion would be no different than the way the man had caged and grubbed at him.

But instead he had found Xie Lian in a dark room, collapsed in bed with a face almost white with pain, but still reaching for him. His god had curled against him and sought comfort from him, and Hua Cheng was pretty sure he had never done anything in this life or death that

could warrant such favour. Especially not after he had failed his god again — *yet again* — and let someone attack him. Forced him to defend himself even in the state he was in.

Hua Cheng had wanted to throw himself at Xie Lian's mercy and beg for correction, and it had only the obvious pain of his god that had kept him still and quiet. He would serve first, and only beg for censure once his god was well enough to trouble himself with it. Surely now should be the time, and yet His Highness, with his endless and unfathomable patience, had discarded it all out of hand. Had insisted that nothing needed to change. Did that mean he didn't truly understand what, exactly, Black Water had been implying by his statement, didn't understand the ravenous depths of it? Or did it mean that he would allow Hua Cheng to worship at his feet as he had been desperate to do for centuries? Or perhaps it only meant that Hua Cheng's devotion was such a petty thing that it made no difference one way or another how he conducted himself.

If it was the former, should he correct it? Confess what he had been fearfully hiding behind his ribs ever since he had first found his god? But if it was one of the latter then he feared saying the wrong thing and upsetting this delicate balance. As it was, he didn't know how long he would be allowed this explicit and personal devotion, and like the greedy, pathetic ghost he was he couldn't bear to lose it, especially not before His Highness had recovered.

Especially not when it had somehow, miraculous, impossibly, led to his god cooking for him. Hua Cheng was still feeling a little dazed about the whole thing, but the morning had happened like one big, strange dream and then suddenly he was in the kitchen watching Xie Lian chop and steam and stir and eventually ladle out two portions of food.

And then he had a bowl of His Highness's cooking directly in front of him, food that his god had made for him, just for him, with his own two hands. And His Highness was smiling at him while passing it over, like nothing made him happier than this!

Well, if His Highness didn't want to address what had been said last night then Hua Cheng certainly wasn't going to, not when he had the privilege of eating food made for him by his god.

"I call it Dawn Brightens The Day!"

"That's the perfect name for a dish like this," he said sincerely.

Nothing could better describe Hua Cheng's feelings after that fraught night only to wake up and find himself in this beautiful dream. It was the perfect name. It was the perfect food. The flavour was unusual, different tastes and textures clamouring for attention, in many ways unlike anything Hua Cheng had ever tasted but at the same time achingly familiar. It tasted like food that had been left at the altar of a god but fed to a child instead, because somehow an ascended prince thought the child had been more deserving of the food that had been left to him in worship. Because a god wanted that worthless child to live for him, and wanted him fed and full and cared for.

It was delicious.

If this was the only thing Hua Cheng ate for the rest of his existence, he would surely be in paradise.

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After the meal, Xie Lian did indeed succeed in convincing Hua Cheng that they should return to the armoury.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather rest today?"

Xie Lian clasped his hands together in supplication. "Really, my headache from yesterday is completely gone! I'll be sure to rest earlier today, I won't let it go so long! And I won't throw anyone through any doors!"

It turned out that one way or another, Hua Cheng was as determined to give in to Xie Lian's demands as ever and readily yielded.

"But let me give gege some spiritual energy," he added.

Xie Lian braced himself for what he had expected would come, ever since it was revealed that Hua Cheng knew who he was. It was really just par for the course that a joke or two would be made about his status as a banished god and his complete lack of spiritual energy. It wouldn't bother him, he was used to it, but it was regrettable.

It didn't come though. Hua Cheng seemed perfectly sincere so Xie Lian held out his hand, somewhat dazed at the thought of someone actually wanting to exchange spiritual energy with him.

"We should test and see if it helps with the headaches," Hua Cheng explained, taking his hand. "And… if gege likes, you can have my verbal password. Then if you need me, you can just call."

Ah. So despite seeing just how well Xie Lian had bounced back Hua Cheng *was* still fretting about last night. It made Xie Lian feel rather bad for worrying him. Surely, back at the Gambler's Den while the man had been trying to sell him on his merits, the man would have explained that he couldn't die? Xie Lian hadn't actually been in any danger that night, except, it would seem, from a worsened headache and general embarrassment at his behaviour.

He meant to explain this to Hua Cheng, to calm any concerns, but then Hua Cheng was lifting his hand and passing along spiritual energy.

The shock of having spiritual energy again — and so much of it! — paled in comparison to the method in which Hua Cheng chose to share it. He had lifted Xie Lian's hand and pressed his lips to the back of it.

Xie Lian, who had never kissed or been kissed by anyone, felt like his heart was about to jump out of his chest!

"San Lang…" he said. "Isn't that unnecessary?"

"Mm?" said Hua Cheng, lifting his head. "But surely gege knows this is the most efficient way to exchange spiritual energy?"

Xie Lian knew no such thing, but he also hadn't spent that much time in the Heavenly Realm with other gods and hadn't had any close friends among them before he had been banished twice over so he wasn't much of an expert.

"But then in that case wouldn't it be most efficient if it were both of our lips touching, rather than your lips to my hand?"

Hua Cheng stared at him with wide, dark eyes, and Xie Lian felt rather self-conscious. Had he said something really so foolish?

"I suppose it would be," said Hua Cheng a little distantly. "Would gege like some more?"

"Ah, no, this is really more than enough! I can't remember the last time I had so much spiritual energy! You really are too generous, San Lang."

"Not at all," said Hua Cheng, who was still sounding a bit off, considering he had initiated the whole thing.

"So what's your verbal password?"

"Oh, right! Well…" Hua Cheng bent close to Xie Lian's ear and whispered, despite there not being another soul around to hear.

Xie Lian's eyes widened. "San Lang! Are you serious? Someone has to recite this any time they want to speak with you? Isn't that too embarrassing?"

Hua Cheng's eyes twinkled with familiar mischief. "Completely serious. It keeps trash from trying to call me needlessly — but of course if gege wants to talk, I'm always free. Give it a try, if you don't believe me."

Xie Lian could suddenly appreciate why Yin Yu tended to seek Hua Cheng out in person when he had something to say. Even now, knowing that it was Hua Cheng's idea of a joke, he found he couldn't bring himself to think such a thing even within the safety of his own mind. It was simply too embarrassing!

"Perhaps I should be the one to reach out, if gege can't bear to say it. What's your password?"

That was much easier! "Just recite the *Dao De Jing* a thousand times."

There was a moment's hesitation while Hua Cheng stared at him, before the corners of his mouth twitched and Xie Lian, to his delight, heard Hua Cheng's voice in his ear.

Gege is very funny.

Xie Lian couldn't help but grin back. *Most of the other people I told didn't seem to think so…* The only person he could recall ever laughing at this joke laughed so easily at things that it

really hadn't been an accomplishment. Mostly it had been met with exasperation among the gods, even after he explained the trick.

Other people have poor taste.

"So we can go to the armoury now?" Xie Lian asked, returning to the point at hand.

"Whatever gege wants is my pleasure to give."

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"I would really like to try out a few of these, they feel so well-balanced they must be wonderful to swing," Xie Lian mused.

The two of them sat on one of the pillow-strewn benches he had ordered Yin Yu to arrange in the armoury last night. His Highness had not remarked on their sudden appearance, but given his intense focus on the weapons it was just as likely he hadn't even noticed something as mundane as the furnishings. Hua Cheng was grateful he had arranged for them so quickly, because His Highness had allowed himself to be convinced to sit in one spot for a while rather than rushing in every direction as he had yesterday. Currently Xie Lian was comparing the grips of several different swords, speaking at length about his thoughts on materials and weights and hand-guards. Hua Cheng had been all too eager to join in, because every word he said just spurred His Highness to say a dozen more.

By sheer coincidence, Hua Cheng would also really like to see Xie Lian try a few of them out. They had been sitting sedately for long enough that Hua Cheng thought perhaps it would be safe to attempt.

"There's a courtyard past the door in the far wall," he offered. "Shall I carry some out for you?"

Xie Lian was clearly more than eager; if anything he struggled to rein in his choices as he picked various weapons to bring out with them. At first he attempted to carry them himself, but with some maneuvering and wheedling Hua Cheng managed to get the weapons into his own arms and put Xie Lian's hands to the much better purpose of holding onto him and keeping his balance.

Eventually Xie Lian conceded that they probably had enough to be getting on with, and the two of them stepped out through a smaller iron door that led them out to a little, dirt-floored courtyard. A stone walkway ringed the courtyard and was separated by a low, stone wall, but other than that the space was clear and served the singular purpose of being a place for Hua Cheng to mess around with the weapons he collected.

And now as space for his god to get to test them out. Hua Cheng could barely contain his excitement as he arranged the weapons along the low wall while Xie Lian picked out one with which to start.

The first one he selected was a qiang spear. Hua Cheng settled happily onto the wall to watch while Xie Lian made his way to the centre of the courtyard.

His movements were as graceful as Hua Cheng remembered. More so. He hadn't been old enough or experienced enough yet to appreciate what an unparalleled martial warrior His Highness was back when they had first crossed paths. Now, even though his movements were somewhat limited by his own healing, seeing him move was artistry in motion. It made Hua Cheng want to carve, and to despair at the knowledge that no medium would ever be able to capture this, that his skills would always fail when set to such a task.

Xie Lian worked through a few experimental steps with the qiang, each step elegant and slow, and would then pause and use the qiang to brace himself while he waited for whatever dizziness he was experiencing to ease. But the fact that he was able to go through such complex steps at all made Hua Cheng think that perhaps the spiritual energy was helping, at least somewhat.

After a while, he returned to the wall to swap out the qiang, wiping sweat from his brow as he did so. Hua Cheng watched with some trepidation as his hands lingered to rub at his temple.

"You're alright?" he asked carefully, because His Highness's face was so bright with joy that he was loath to do anything to interrupt it.

Xie Lian lowered his hand. "Yes, yes, just thinking about how bright the sun is. It would be nice to have something to block it with, but it's really no matter. Here, let's try this one next!"

He selected a handsome sword that practically sang when it was drawn from its sheath, and then he was back in the middle of the courtyard. As he began to move with the sword, his steps became a little surer, a little quicker than last time. The way long-sleeved robes swirl amid the reddish dust of the courtyard cried to be painted. Hua Cheng was just letting his attention waver slightly, to consider what combination of dyes he would need to mimic the way the sun turned the dust almost golden, and if a dry-brush approach could capture the texture, when suddenly Xie Lian's foot slipped.

Between one moment and the next, Xie Lian was suddenly on his knees, and Hua Cheng was on his feet.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," said Xie Lian before Hua Cheng could get a word out. "Without the staff to lean on, I just overdid it a little."

"Headache?" Hua Cheng fretted, immediately dropping to the ground next to Xie Lian. The image of Xie Lian yesterday, in so much pain that he had been forced to close his eyes and collapse against Hua Cheng's chest even while a potential threat had been so near — or him later in his room, made so ill as to be pale and sweaty and nearly beyond words — was not one that Hua Cheng would be forgetting in a hurry. He would not let his own negligence or carelessness allow his god to become injured in such a way again.

Xie Lian waved him off though. "No, no pain at all, just dizzy." He must have sensed Hua Cheng skepticism because he opened an eye and smiled ruefully. "I'm being honest this time, I really am just dizzy. Too much moving at once. Ah, if only there was a way to practise that didn't involve watching the rest of the world try to spin itself like a top."

Hua Cheng considered this. "You close you eyes when we walk sometimes. Does that help?" Of course, usually he wasn't holding a sharp object and had Hua Cheng to guide him, but it was an idea.

Xie Lian seemed to agree.

"San Lang is so smart! Ruoye, do you mind?"

And suddenly the demon silk appeared again, whipping out from wherever it hid beneath Xie Lian's robes. With a deft movement it looped itself around Xie Lian's eyes.

"Help me up?" he asked, reaching out with literally blind trust that Hua Cheng would pull him safely to his feet and lead him back to the centre of the courtyard.

"Is it helping?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Mm, it's a little disorienting, but I've trained like this before so it's not bad. I promise I'll stop if it's too much. Will you pass me a sword?"

Hua Cheng did, describing the one he had chosen at length mostly because the more detail he gave the more Xie Lian smiled, as if he was taking in as great of pleasure in hearing Hua Cheng describe the sword as he did in holding it. Once Xie Lian confidently had it in his hand, Hua Cheng backed off to sit on the bench once more and watch.

Xie Lian still had to pause and orient himself occasionally, but it was considerably less now that his eyes weren't being given a chance to overtax his brain. Even like this, he was a force of nature.

"I think anyone who gets to spar against gege must be blessed," Hua Cheng remarked, when he couldn't bear to sit in silence any longer.

"Then why don't we spar?" Xie Lian suggested. "I have more than enough spiritual energy now after all!"

"With the blindfold?" Hua Cheng asked.

"En. San Lang may need to go easy on me."

Hua Cheng pressed his face into his hands and grinned stupidly against his palms. It was a good thing Xie Lian was effectively blind right now, because he must look like a fool. He was the Scourge of the Heavens, feared across three realms, the very mention of E-Ming filled others with fright. No one dared challenge him. And yet his god stood with easy self-assurance while he was blindfolded, cut off from his own spiritual energy, recovering from a harrowing ordeal that left him unable to balance properly, and carrying a borrowed sword. Despite all of this, he sounded relaxed and confident that he was perfectly capable of meeting Hua Cheng in a satisfying spar, and Hua Cheng had never loved anyone more.

"Do you have a weapon you would like to try sparring against? Or one that you would like me to use?"

"Whichever you prefer. I would like to know more about what weapon San Lang favours."

"I suppose that would be my spiritual weapon, though I can't say I prefer it. Really it's a nuisance, but it can be a useful tool when it behaves."

"San Lang has a spiritual weapon? Can I see?" he asked, reaching up to unwind Ruoye in his eagerness.

"Maybe we should spar, and then you can tell me what you learn about it."

"Oh! Yes, that sounds fun! Let's do that!" Xie Lian agreed, and immediately Ruoye flattened back into place.

Xie Lian took an opening stance, posture sturdy and defensive, head raised and ready to rely on his other senses.

Hua Cheng drew E-Ming, who he had been keeping hidden for the most part, not wanting to give his god any more reasons to feel threatened. The sabre was already shivering with anticipation, excited to finally be drawn in His Highness's presence.

Deciding to play a little first, to get a better idea for how well His Highness could sense him like this, Hua Cheng started with footwork. After all, he still didn't know the completely the brain injury impacted His Highness's other senses.

He took a few playful steps and he saw the way Xie Lian's head tilted ever so slightly in his direction, clearly tracking the sound. He changed this pattern, and Xie Lian adapted to that easily. Next, he softened his steps more, padding near-silently a little further, though never far enough to risk being at his god's back. His god didn't move out of his defensive stance, but he could see the little tells His Highness had, continuing to mark his movement, shifting his feet to match him. Feeling heartened by this, Hua Cheng leapt soundlessly into the air, practically gliding above the ground before touching down at the opposite side he had been standing at before.

Xie Lian's head hadn't shifted, still angled like he was listening for movement from where Hua Cheng had been before.

The second Hua Cheng's toes touched the ground he used it to twist his body around and strike. It was meant to be a glancing blow, just to warm His Highness up for this strange sort of spar, and that had been his first mistake.

Xie Lian had been feinting. Hua Cheng hadn't even finished turning around before Xie Lian's blade was lashing out, countering E-Ming easily and pressing his own advantage. Hua Cheng was forced to dodge away and leap backwards if he didn't want to be struck.

"San Lang is trying to be sneaky," Xie Lian chided happily.

"I was mistaken to try it," said Hua Cheng. And he certainly was. Really, he should have learnt from Black Water's mistakes.

"No, no, it's fun, please keep going. I haven't had to work this hard to pay attention to a fight in a long time!"

So he kept going.

Xie Lian stayed primarily in a single spot and Hua Cheng didn't attempt to draw him away from it, letting Xie Lian set the pace for how comfortable he was with moving, but they ended up having an excellent game of attack and defense. No matter what tricks Hua Cheng tried, he couldn't land a single blow, and Xie Lian gradually grew more daring, bounding forward and back, hounding after Hua Cheng when he made a move that was too bold in an attempt to land a hit and had left himself exposed in some way. Always though, he returned to his starting point and reoriented himself with unflappable patience.

It wasn't until both of them had worked up a sweat, that Hua Cheng lowered E-Ming. "Well, gege, it would appear we have a tie," he said.

"Ah, I suppose we do," said Xie Lian, also lowering his sword though not yet unwinding Ruoye.

"I'll come and put the sword away, if you'd like to rest," Hua Cheng said, stepping forward and holding out his hand for the sword.

Of course, Xie Lian couldn't see him like that and didn't respond to the gesture, so Hua Cheng walked closer, telegraphing his movements as he reached for the sword's hilt.

He was devastatingly close to His Highness, close enough to appreciate how his skin had flushed from exercise, how his hair had been teased in the open air, and the suddenly mischievous smile that flashed across his lips. He appreciated all that, just as one of His Highness's feet neatly snaked around his ankle and whipped it out from under him, His Highness's free hand giving Hua Cheng's shoulder a shove that toppled him completely.

The whole maneuver had taken seconds, and Hua Cheng had been entirely too enraptured by it all to even consider doing anything to stop his descent. However, between the arch of His Highness's leg and the grip of his hand on his robes, his fall was almost gentle and he landed on the ground within a soft cloud of red dust.

"I had no idea that gege played so dirty," Hua Cheng bemoaned, though he made no effort to rise.

His god's face hovered above him, radiant and alive and laughing, and all Hua Cheng had to do was lie at his feet and appreciate it. He wondered if he could convince Xie Lian that they should just stay like this for the next sichen or two. It would be bliss, especially with the thrill of sparring still singing through his veins and the knowledge that each strike had been made with Hua Cheng's spiritual energy being put to work through His Highness's meridians.

"San Lang was the one who wanted to be sneaky. You should know better than to let your guard down around an opponent," Xie Lian chided playfully, as he reached out a hand to pull Hua Cheng effortlessly back to his feet.

"Perhaps gege will have to train this poor San Lang."

Xie Lian clucked his tongue. "I think this San Lang needs to practise his calligraphy much more than his swordsmanship."

"As gege says," said Hua Cheng, not bothering to keep the mourning from his voice.

Carefully, so as not to startle him since the demon silk was still around his eyes, Hua Cheng reached for Xie Lian's hands. Without hesitation, Xie Lian wrapped his arms around Hua Cheng's and leaned against him as he was led back to the wall. Once there, he tucked himself against Hua Cheng's side in the way he did after he had been moving too much and needed to recuperate. They would have to sit and rest before returning through the armoury — he hoped Xie Lian hadn't pushed himself too hard.

"So, what does gege now know about my spiritual weapon?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Let's see," he said. "I know you fight with a scimitar, that's very obvious. You've clearly trained in the military at some point, but I doubt it was for long, San Lang has too much of his own flair."

"Like my handwriting?"

"Ah… no, not quite like that," said Xie Lian by which Hua Cheng could only assume he meant *this flair is actually quite effective* .

"What else?"

"It's fairly long and slender, and it relies much more on speed than brute strength. The cross guard isn't a standard shape, is it? It felt curved… The whole thing feels like it must be quite decorative, not utilitarian at all. It obviously suits you. Is San Lang as adept with a sword as he is with a sabre?"

"I can fight with a sword, but I was told long ago I was better suited for a sabre. So far gege is exactly right! Can you tell me anything else?"

"I could tell it was quite cute!"

Hua Cheng snorted, but Xie Lian grinned at him. "I'm right, I can tell," he insisted.

"Gege, you know I hate to disagree with you, but how can a sabre you're battling against be cute? Never mind a Ghost King's cursed blade."

"It's sentient, isn't it?" Xie Lian said. "Whenever we were in the middle of an especially exciting set, I could hear it rattling! I think it was excited too, wasn't it?"

"Maybe that was me shaking in fear over gege's martial prowess."

It was Xie Lian's turn to snort. He finally drew Ruoye away. "May I see it now?"

"You know there are stories about E-Ming," Hua Cheng said. "That it was created through bloody human sacrifices, and that even touching it risks drawing its curse onto yourself. It's a blade of misfortune."

"I'm a god of misfortune, so we'll be a good match," said Xie Lian easily, holding out his hands. "And I don't believe that any blade that sounds as cute as this one can be cursed."

"You are not a god of misfortune," Hua Cheng said firmly. "Knowing you has only brought me good fortune."

Xie Lian laughed weakly and patted Hua Cheng's knee. "It's only been a few days, I'm sure a disaster is just around the corner. In any case, I'm only teasing, please don't take me so seriously, San Lang. I've been wondering what books you found about me… you haven't seen the stories about my luck then? Don't think anything of it, I've been called so many things, and it's not as if I'm even a god anymore."

"...Dianxia will always be a god," he said, because if they were going to talk about this now, then Hua Cheng would make his opinion on the matter perfectly clear. "He is the only god that matters."

Xie Lian had obviously been trying to keep things light, and he seemed wrong-footed to be confronted by a Hua Cheng who was so determined not to let that go. But Hua Cheng refused to tolerate other gods speaking about His Highness like that, and hearing Xie Lian say it himself was all the worse.

"Ha ha, it's been a long time since I've heard that title… you did find an old book if it was still referring to me as that. Don't bother with it, San Lang, I'm not a prince of anything these days. Well, let's at least agree on one thing: if I'm not a god of misfortune, then your sabre surely isn't cursed with misfortune either. Won't San Lang let me see it now?"

Hua Cheng relented, resisting the urge to contradict half of what his god had just said. He drew out E-Ming and laid it flat across His Highness's waiting palms.

Immediately its eye snapped open and squinted into a look of pure bliss as it began to shiver, because of course it did. Was it ever possible for his wretched blade not to make a fool of them?

"Behave," he hissed. He didn't actually say *you're being held by Dianxia so don't be an embarrassment* but it was implied.

At the very least E-Ming stilled somewhat, but its eye was still curved in a sharp crescent that rolled with joy as Xie Lian handled it.

"I was right, it is adorable!" Xie Lian cooed as he stroked his hand up and down the dull side of the blade. "And so handsome too, the detailing in the cross guard is even more fine to look at than to feel. San Lang did an excellent job forging his spiritual weapon, no wonder this is what you favour."

Hua Cheng had to bite his tongue not to argue against E-Ming's 'adorableness'. Or to blush under the unexpected praise. E-Ming, the little wretch, had no such restraint and looked like it was in paradise under the gentle touches and words.

"What matters is its usefulness," he said instead. "I wanted it to do justice to the man who suggested I take up the sabre."

"Whoever that is, he could only be proud of such a weapon, I'm sure! San Lang is such a dutiful disciple, to work so hard. What went into creating such a weapon, if you don't mind me asking? And does it have a name? Is it always so responsive?"

Carefully stepping over the first question, not wanting to go into the horrors of Mount Tonglu, his own cursed eye, or his brief, farcical ascension, Hua Cheng said, "It's called E-Ming, and normally it's too lazy to even open its eye — it likes you, gege."

This made Xie Lian positively coo in delight, which was be a sound that Hua Cheng would be carefully memorizing and bringing out again anytime he was feeling disheartened. If it could be bottled, it could certainly be sold as a spiritual medicine, something to cure all ails.

Their chat was prematurely drawn to a close though when Xie Lian suddenly yawned, loud enough to make his jaw creak and sudden enough that he was blinking in surprise after.

"Ah! San Lang, I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me."

"Not at all, gege is still recovering. After so much activity it's only natural that gege is growing tired. Shall we return to your rooms? You should rest. It was easier to do so in the gardens, so you're likely feeling more tired than expected now that you've been awake this whole time."

Xie Lian sighed. "To need to nap so much during the day… maybe I'm finally feeling my age. Usually when I get hurt I can shake it off much easier than this."

"Gege doesn't have to. If you're tired, isn't it better to rest?"

Xie Lian gave a chastised smile. "I can't argue with that logic, you're too wise. But San Lang can't stay around the room wasting his time while I'm asleep. If I'm to nap like an old man, then you must go and do something with your time, alright?"

Hua Cheng couldn't say he particularly liked that deal at all. It sounded entirely too much like leaving Xie Lian to wander around and get attacked like he had yesterday. If he had always wanted to be near Xie Lian before, it had only gotten worse since Black Water's intrusion. He would like to plaster himself against His Highness's back like a robe and never leave. But he had the good sense not to say any of that.

"Gege truly is a taskmaster. But I'll do as you wish, so long as you let me walk you back to your rooms."

"I would like that," Xie Lian said with apparent sincerity as he passed E-Ming back to Hua Cheng.

Hua Cheng tried not to feel smug over his own spiritual weapon when Xie Lian wrapped his arms around him rather than the blade.

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Xie Lian woke comfortable and content. He couldn't say how long he had been asleep, but sunlight was still painting patterns across the room and had turned his bed into a warm cocoon. He stretched grandly, before beginning the slow process of sitting upright without upsetting his healing brain.

It felt slightly easier than usual. Was it because the nap had helped so much, or simply because Hua Cheng's spiritual energy was still filling his meridians? He couldn't believe how well it had helped in the armoury. While it hadn't eliminated the vertigo, it had turned it into only a minor nuisance instead of a crippling pain. San Lang truly was the best.

That thought was all it took for Xie Lian to suddenly feel the emptiness of his room though without Hua Cheng there to fill it.

"What do you think," he said to the butterfly that had been behind when Hua Cheng had left him to his nap, "shall we go find San Lang on our own? Hm, where to look though… perhaps the office he met Lord Black Water in? Do you know how to get there?"

The butterfly, which had been crawling affectionately across his fingers, lifted off and began flapping towards the door, so Xie Lian took that as a yes. Really, he had no particular reason to assume Hua Cheng would be there instead of anywhere else in this grand manor, but it was a place to start. Given how much time Xie Lian has been taking away from his duties lately, it would make sense for him to go to his office and try to catch up on administrative work, or whatever else a city lord and Ghost King would have to do. If not, he could always recalibrate and guess again, or give up and call for him instead.

…If he could bring himself to actually say that embarrassing verbal password.

In any case, it struck Xie Lian as much more fun to surprise him. And it would feel good to prove he could successfully navigate the manor on his own, to both Hua Cheng and himself.

So he took things slow, kept a hand on the wall and stopped to sit if the need struck. It was difficult at times not to grow frustrated by his own slow progress, but in the end it was probably good for him to take this time to meditate. He had learnt how to take misfortune and continue to live with gratitude and appreciation, and he shouldn't lose that when he now had so many good things to appreciate.

The butterfly was a perfectly patient companion, especially when Ruoye eventually got bored and decided to come out to play with it above Xie Lian's head while he rested.

Eventually the butterfly landed on a door that must be Hua Cheng's office. Xie Lian slid it open quietly, not wanting to disrupt Hua Cheng if he was concentrating.

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Yin Yu braced himself on the low ladder while he worked at shoving a large box of records back onto one of the upper shelves. He was lucky that the notes he had needed had been recorded quite recently, as it meant that this current dispute would be easily resolved — partially because he had found them quickly, without needing to dig into older records, and partially because it meant they were recent enough to have been written in his own hand rather than Hua Chengzhu's. Anything dealing with matters over two centuries old were a guaranteed headache.

Really, this entire affair was a largely trivial one, but a lot of city management really did just come down to resolving petty conflicts as smoothly as possible before tensions were allowed to build and suddenly a quarter of the city was burning. That never ended well for anyone, because it inevitably meant that Hua Chengzhu would be arriving in a temper to sort things out. So when Hua Chengzhu was gone from the city, the duty of sorting through local petitions generally fell on Yin Yu's shoulders. He couldn't say he minded much, as ridiculous as some got, because it tended to be rather sensible, methodical work and Yin Yu was a sensible, methodical person who tried his best to be compassionate. He thought it rather suited his temperament, and he liked being able to perform a job well… though he couldn't pretend it wasn't a relief when Hua Chengzhu was in residence and dealing with the issues personally. It usually meant he cleaved through them with brutal efficiency, but no one dared argue about the outcomes when it was him deciding.

However even with Hua Chengzhu in residence right now, Yin Yu didn't dare bring any of these issues to him. The current one, for example, was about title deeds and property lease lines between a brothel and a fishmonger. It was a stink about, well, the stink. It was mostly silly drama but it had begun to drag other neighbouring businesses into the mess so Yin Yu had decided it was time to step in. Suggesting that Hua Chengzhu should deal with that when he had finally found his god after, allegedly, eight hundred years of relentless searching didn't seem like a wise move. Especially considering the state in which said god had been found. Especially considering the rather delicate state in which he still seemed to be. So Yin Yu was dealing with it.

"Oh! You also have a cursed shackle."

Yin Yu did not drop the unwieldy box of records on his head because he *had* been a martial god at one point, but it was a near thing. Instead he took a steadying breath, finished shoving the box back into place, and descended the ladder.

Self-consciously, he ensured his sleeves, which had fallen down around his elbows while manoeuvring the box, were sitting properly back in place.

Xie Lian was standing in the doorway. Really it was an adjustment to get used to there being not only another person in Paradise Manor but a person with enough martial prowess that he could enter a room without Yin Yu noticing his presence immediately. Still, so far everything he had seen of Xie Lian suggested that he was a kind, good-natured person so it could be worse — even if he was now eyeing Yin Yu's wrist. That was not something he advertised, though he hadn't missed Xie Lian's use of the word "also". Of course, Yin Yu already knew that Xie Lian was a banished god as well, but if he was acknowledging it then that must mean

that he and Hua Chengzhu had finally spoken and come clean about some matters. It would be nice not to have to pretend not to know who Xie Lian was.

"That's correct, Dianxia," said Yin Yu, who was happy to no longer be calling him 'honoured guest' like an idiot.

Xie Lian immediately flustered at this though, hands coming up as if to wave away the title. "Oh, no, please, there's no need! If you were also a god then you must know you couldn't throw a stone in the Heavenly Realm without hitting a crown prince, calling me such a thing really is just silly. Especially now that I'm no longer a god *or* a prince! Please, just call me Xie Lian."

Yin Yu would absolutely not be doing that. Unless Hua Chengzhu gave some indication that he should be doing otherwise, he would be very diligently offering all due deference to his employer's god.

"I only meant, I hadn't realised you were also a banished god," Xie Lian explained, a bit more subdued. "What a strange thing to collect, don't you think? Though I suppose a Ghost King can afford eccentric hobbies."

Yin Yu wasn't sure what to make of that sort of statement or tone. He was under no illusions that part of Hua Cheng's choice in taking him in and protecting him had to do with how his misfortune had mirrored that of his god. Hua Cheng would often sit him down and experiment on the cursed shackle that bound his wrist, seeking a way to one day help Xie Lian with this exact problem. He certainly knew that he was not equal to Xie Lian in Hua Chengzhu's eyes, and was frankly quite content with that difference. Whatever sort of affection Hua Chengzhu held for the Flower Crowned Martial God, it burnt with an intensity that frankly intimidated Yin Yu. He was certain that he had never in his life held half that passion for anything.

"I wouldn't suppose to compare my situation to yours," Yin Yu eventually said.

Xie Lian flustered again. "Ah, no, sorry, you're right of course. Our situations are quite different. I didn't mean anything by it."

Good, because Yin Yu had no idea what to *take* from it. They both may be banished gods, but it was abundantly obvious how they differed, surely? Or was this the prince's modesty at play?

"Was there something I could assist you with?" he asked, hoping to steer them to safer waters.

"Ah, no, I was actually thinking I might find San Lang in here."

Yin Yu glanced at the butterfly that was currently sitting on top of Xie Lian's head, wings fanning lazily. It was impossible to know when Hua Chengzhu was looking through their eyes, but still, if it was Xie Lian asking…

"If you called him, I'm sure he would come."

Xie Lian nodded. "Yes, I had thought of that. I thought I might go find him instead, but maybe I'll have to… I'm not sure where else to look…"

Yin Yu knew. What he didn't know was if he should say anything. It wasn't like Hua Cheng generally liked to be interrupted when he was in the sun room, but if anyone would be allowed to, it would be His Highness. Especially if they had acknowledged that Xie Lian was Hua Cheng's god, then surely whatever he got up to in the sun room would only be natural.

The real question was what was likely to upset Hua Chengzhu more: sending Xie Lian to him when he wasn't expecting him, or deliberately withholding aid from His Highness and keeping him from Hua Cheng?

"I believe Hua Chengzhu is in the sun room. The wraith butterfly could lead you."

"Oh! Thank you very much! Do you know where that is?" Xie Lian added to the deadly spiritual weapon, which obligingly took off down the hall like a delicate little tour guide rather than a tool used to take down gods.

Yin Yu watched Xie Lian wander off before returning to his duties with a shake of his head. Another perfectly abnormal day in Ghost City.

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Xie Lian came to a sliding door he had never entered before, though this time he found himself hesitating when the butterfly landed on it. Last time he had entered quietly because he hadn't want to risk disrupting Hua Cheng but he had still interrupted Yin Yu in his tasks. Whether he entered quietly or not, he would surely force Hua Cheng's attention away from whatever he was doing, but what if he was doing something that he didn't want Xie Lian walking in on?

Seeing Yin Yu quietly busy with what could only be tasks related to the manor or city reminded Xie Lian suddenly that just because he had been given a large amount of indulgence from Hua Cheng, it didn't actually mean he would be welcome in all things.

Should he knock instead? Or should he have called for him through the butterfly after all? Or just stayed in his rooms and waited for him to return to Xie Lian when he had the time?

You couldn't play with a new toy constantly, and having it pressure you for attention would surely get tiresome much quicker than one that knew when to give some space.

The butterfly, having apparently grown tired of this waffling, flew close enough for its wings to tap against Xie Lian's cheek before returning to the door with obvious impatience. Xie Lian laughed at himself for being so indecisive all of a sudden. He had felt thrown, seeing that terribly familiar pattern emblazoned on Yin Yu's wrist, but really it wasn't like that changed anything, did it? It was simply in line with what he had already pieced together about Hua Cheng's interest in him. He had known since the first day that this had a time limit, and that it would simply have to be an enjoyable thing for however long it lasted.

When the novelty wore off, perhaps Hua Cheng would let him stay around Ghost City and he could work alongside Yin Yu. That would be pleasant; after all, Yin Yu clearly had a decent relationship with Hua Cheng whether or not he was dragged around like a favoured pet, and Xie Lian wouldn't mind such a calm-natured companion to work alongside. That, or he would simply go on his way, which had always been the plan — it didn't do well for him to stay in one place long enough for his luck to catch up to him, after all.

Really, what was he doing letting himself get so worked up? For now, Hua Cheng seemed to enjoy his company, and Xie Lian enjoyed his, and surely that was enough for anyone. No need to overthink things or fret about the future. He knocked on the door.

"San Lang, are you there?"

"Gege?" His voice sounded rather startled, and there was the noise of someone quickly moving across a room before the door was flung open.

The sight that greeted Xie Lian was really quite a stunning one, with Hua Cheng in the door, backlit and looking slightly frazzled but no less delighted to see Xie Lian. He was wearing quite a different outfit, though the predominant colour was still red. The outer robe was short-sleeved and tightly belted, and the sleeves of the underrobe were rolled sharply back, revealing pale forearms. His hair had likewise been fastened out of the way, done up into a knot at the top of his head.

His form had also been changed. Xie Lian was of course aware that the Ghost King could change shapes, since the Hua Cheng from his fractured memories of the Gambler's Den looked very different than the gentle-faced youth that he appeared as in his San Lang form. This was a different skin, it would appear. He was taller than Xie Lian was used to San Lang being, with graceful, longer-fingered hands, and a thoughtful, scholarly sort of face. It was handsome in an entirely different way. Xie Lian found himself rather pleased that Hua Cheng was relaxed enough around him to show him a skin other than the singular San Lang form he had been wearing since Xie Lian had woken up.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" Xie Lian asked. "I woke up and thought I'd have a walk around the manor to find you. Yin Yu mentioned that you might be here."

"Ah, no, no, of course not. I'm always happy to see gege. If you're awake, shall we go do something together?"

Xie Lian had told himself he wouldn't pry into Hua Cheng's affairs, but he was at once too desperately curious not to; Hua Cheng's hands and bared arms were speckled with colours.

"Was San Lang painting?" he asked eagerly.

Embarrassment at being caught out flashed across Hua Cheng's face. "That's right, gege. … Would you like to see?"

"If San Lang doesn't mind!"

"No, of course not. …Pray gege isn't offended."

Xie Lian couldn't imagine what there would be that could offend him as he stepped into the room. He saw immediately why it was called the sun room — one entire wall was windows that had been thrown open to let sunlight stream through and make the light, airy room practically glow. It must be a wonderful space for painting. There were supplies shoved and stacked around the room, but only one easel stood in the centre with a silk-covered wooden frame arranged on it.

"It's beautiful," Xie Lian breathed, quite honestly, as he approached the partially done painting.

The figure on it was painted with a delicate hand, making its hair and robes look almost ephemeral, and the colours were simply breath-taking. The silk depicted a warrior of some sort, brandishing a sword and moving in a swirl of white, rusty red, and gold, as if robes, dust, and sun were all being blended into a single strike. It looked like it could jump right off the silk at any moment.

"Gege likes it?" asked Hua Cheng who had come up behind Xie Lian.

"Yes, of course! San Lang is very talented!"

He leaned in closer, to admire the strong, martial stance the figure was in. It looked like the sort of painting you would see depicting an epic scene from a tale, or decorating a temple to show off a god's merits. The closer he looked though, the more startled he was to realise that he recognised the sword that the figure was holding.

This made him pull back and study the figure's face more closely.

…It was him!

"San Lang," he said in quiet awe. It was most definitely himself, from when he had been playing around with the armoury swords this morning.

"If gege likes it, perhaps he would be willing to model for me another day?" said Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian laughed because he didn't know what else to do. "Why would you need me to model for you, when you have one painting of me already? How many pictures of the same subject does one need?"

"When there's something I like, I like," said Hua Cheng simply. "If I like painting gege, then I like painting gege, and why shouldn't I do it as many times as I wish? Unless it makes you uncomfortable, of course…"

"No, no, not at all! If San Lang wants me to model, then how could I refuse?"

Hua Cheng beamed, like he had been given a wonderful gift.

"Shall I tidy this up for now? We could go do something else now that you're up."

"I don't want to interrupt, and isn't it better to continue to work on it while the paints are fresh? It's been a long time since I've painted, and I don't have anything like San Lang's

skills, but perhaps I could join you?"

Hua Cheng eagerly agreed to this, and bustled off to set up a frame and length of silk for Xie Lian. Rather than a tall, standing easel like Hua Cheng was using, he set up a small frame in front of a chair and stretched silk over that, so that Xie Lian could work comfortably from a seated position.

Xie Lian had never been a great artist, and saw no point in trying to mimic the highly detailed, brightly coloured painting which Hua Cheng was creating. He had always found landscapes much easier, so he decided on an ink and wash painting. There had been an elegant copse of bamboo out in the garden with a little reflection pool just before it, and that might be fun to paint. He settled down to the task.

The mood in the room was relaxed, almost lazy in the warm sun that came through the wall of windows. They chatted some, about nothing of importance, but often lulled into comfortable silences as they worked. It was only after the sun was beginning to dip too low to continue that Xie Lian interrupted the ease with a question that had been burning in him since he had arrived at the sun room.

"San Lang? You wear different skins, don't you?"

"Yes, I like to change things up. Apologies if it startled you, that other form is a little short for reaching the canvas as I'd like."

"Not at all, I was glad to see it! A supreme's skins are really second to none, aren't they?" After all, he'd had plenty of opportunities to not only see but feel Hua Cheng, and you would never know he was anything but human.

"I'm glad gege thinks so. Is there a particular look that you would be interested in seeing? I take requests," said Hua Cheng, tone playful but with an undercurrent of something else that Xie Lian couldn't name.

Briefly Xie Lian considered playing along and asking for something outrageous, but ultimately decided against it. "More than anything, I would like to see San Lang's true form."

Hua Cheng stiffened.

"Ah, but if that's rude please ignore me! I don't know ghost customs!"

"No, no, not rude at all. If gege wants to see then he wants to see. But… if it's not nice to look at? Not as nice as these other skins?"

"If it's San Lang, then how could it not be nice?"

"What if it's ugly?"

Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng the courtesy to actually consider this question seriously. What if Hua Cheng was ugly? What if he looked like a proper, monstrous ghost, the sort of monster that one imagined ruling over a place like Ghost City?

Really, what a ridiculous question. After Hua Cheng had seen Xie Lian bleeding on his gambling hall floor, and seen him kicking like a senseless horse on a bathing room floor. After he had washed another man's spend from his hair, and seen him get so scared he threw someone through a door, and had covered himself in tears and snot. And he was asking what Xie Lian would do if he was ugly? After all the horrible ways Hua Cheng had seen him?

"It wouldn't matter," said Xie Lian. "I'm not asking because I want it to be pretty or ugly, after all. Only, after all this… you've done so much for me, and we're sort of friends, aren't we? I'd rather be honest with each other. I want to see your true appearance only because it's you, not because you might look one way or another. So I suppose I wouldn't do anything no matter how it looks. As long as it's your true face, I'm sure— Why are you laughing? San Lang, I'm being serious…"

But Hua Cheng just continued to laugh, though he did promise that, soon, he would show Xie Lian his true form. If that was what Xie Lian really wanted.

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was in this way, after the first few tumultuous days, that something of a routine was established around Paradise Manor. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng would share breakfast together at Xie Lian's table, and then choose something to spend the morning doing. They always found things with which to interest themselves.

They sparred in the armoury courtyard, Hua Cheng finally showed him the library, they worked together to fix the shattered door after Xie Lian insisted on putting it to right, and they continued painting, with Xie Lian modelled more the once. It felt rather lazy to lounge about in the sun, but Hua Cheng seemed to revel in it and it really was a pleasant activity for the days when Xie Lian's head hurt worse than usual, or when his ability to process things was particularly bad. Xie Lian continued to cook for Hua Cheng, who had also begun helping in the process which made it all the more enjoyable. Hua Cheng occasionally showed him work related to Ghost City and the two of them would bend their heads over whatever problem or complaint had cropped up. They wandered the manor, worked in the garden, played with dice as Hua Cheng taught him gambling games and showed him how he could share luck so that they weren't so terribly unbalanced, and they even practised Hua Cheng's calligraphy (to Hua Cheng's dismay and Xie Lian's mounting horror). No matter how much time passed, they always seemed to find something worth doing.

Lunch they would eat somewhere around the estate, and Xie Lian had spent about a week insisting they eat in a new room every day so he could see more of the manor house. Most days after lunch, they would go their separate ways for a while. As time passed, Xie Lian found he didn't become as absolutely exhausted as he did in the first few days in Paradise Manor, but a nap was usually a good idea regardless. It gave him a chance to rest his eyes and to let his mind sort through all the sights and sounds and smells it had been bombarded with that morning.

There was also the fact that not every night passed as easily as others, and some days he got little enough rest that he was practically falling asleep against Hua Cheng by lunch. Somehow, he never had any problem sleeping during the day, when his room was warm and sunny and he still had the sound of Hua Cheng's voice in his ears. This also served the purpose of giving Hua Cheng a chance to see to other things. Afterwards, they would usually meet up again and amuse themselves until dinner.

It was such an indulgent, pleasant way to spend his days that sometimes Xie Lian woke up in complete disbelief that it could even be real, and wasn't some strange joke being played on him. The longer it stretched on without either Hua Cheng growing bored of him or disaster striking, the more surreal it became.

Another rather surreal part of their routine was the evenings. At first their evenings had passed normally enough: they would share dinner and talk until it really was too late and Xie Lian couldn't put off going to sleep any longer. Hua Cheng would linger while Xie Lian

changed behind the privacy screen or while he had an evening bath, though Xie Lian wasn't sure if that was a reluctance to be parted or an ongoing concern of Xie Lian falling and concussing himself. After Xie Lian had settled himself into bed, Hua Cheng would excuse himself and that would be that until morning.

Usually. Or it was at first.

The thing was, the nightmares didn't go away. Not that Xie Lian had expected them to, not immediately, he knew better than that. No matter how good he was at leaving the past in the past while awake, he knew by now that memories had a way of reasserting themselves once the mind was at rest, especially when those memories were still raw and new — and in this case, the darkness of the room would occasionally conspire into some sickening mix of the hut and the coffin. This felt profoundly unfair, since he had thought he had finally put enough distance between himself and that incident to stop dreaming of it regularly, but apparently it was recent enough that it didn't take much to reawaken those thoughts. It had been a hundred years of his life after all, he supposed.

Most nights he could wake quietly and console himself quietly, with the assistance of Ruoye and his little butterfly friends to chase away the shadows. Some nights it took more. He would rise and walk shakily around the room or meditate or practise martial forms until he exhausted himself. Some nights he would fetch a comb and brush his hair until he could almost imagine it was Hua Cheng doing this for him and he was reminded of how different his circumstances were now. Some nights he was just forced to lie there in the dark and shiver and gag and wait for dawn.

Some nights, Hua Cheng came. As a rule, Hua Cheng and the butterflies respected Xie Lian's request that the Ghost King not be disturbed for every minor issue, but during truly terrible nightmares, nightmares that left him with a shredded throat from screaming or muscles in agony from fighting the bedding, then he might find himself being woken by Hua Cheng's soft voice or steady hands untangling him from his blanket prison.

Some nights, it was Xie Lian who called for Hua Cheng. When the night was too dark and the man's phantom hands were too close to his back and his couldn't get his breathing under control, sometimes he would whisper Hua Cheng's name until suddenly the Ghost King was there, as if he had nothing better to do in the night than hold Xie Lian like a distraught child and chase away his fears.

And then one night this — if not normal, then at least acceptable — routine changed with no forewarning. The day had been easy, if dreary. It was raining heavily, and Xie Lian had spent the day appreciating the sound of rain hitting a tiled roof, and the two of them had cooked dinner together, enjoying the warm heat and how it pushed back the chill in the air. When Xie Lian had gone to bed that night, after a hot bath, he had been utterly relaxed and had quickly drifted off to the sound of rain.

The rain had continued, and with it came dreams.

Rain pounded against leaves and mud in a dark, midnight forest. Except rather than being quiet and soothing, it had been filled with demonic faces that had leered and screamed at him so loudly that Xie Lian swore his ears would bleed. He had tried to jerk away but he wasn't

sure how he had gotten there or how to leave, only knew it was the work of the man, that he was back with him, and that he was stuck, falling to his knees, cowering under a mortal's boots, the rain pelting him and mud sucking him down, caking his robes, forcing itself into his mouth, dark and bitter. The more he fought, the worse it got.

The man just stood above him, a hammer in his hands. Xie Lian fought and fought, attempting to tear his way out of the mud, out of the roots that were creaking and groaning in their attempt to grow around him, but the man brought the hammer down over and over and over. At first Xie Lian had thought it had been on his own head, and he had screamed at the pain, at the knowledge that the nail was being driven back in, deeper and deeper and deeper so that no one would ever be able to dig it out again. It wasn't until after that he realised, no, the nails being hammered were being driven into wood, not flesh.

The man was constructing a coffin. He had killed Xie Lian in the mountains and had built a coffin and he was going to force him into it. Xie Lian tried to kick but he couldn't move his legs and he wasn't sure if it was the mud or the roots or Ruoye that was holding him down, but then he was being lifted and tossed and he was falling into the coffin and he could hear nails being driven in, sealing him away, locking him in the dark, and he screamed and he clawed and he begged and swore he'd be good, he'd be better, please he couldn't do this again, just let him out, don't leave him alone in the mud. Except he wasn't alone, he wasn't alone, the man was in here with him, pressed up against him, rutting against him in the dark, and there wasn't enough room to move away, there wasn't even enough room to breathe, the air was going to run out and he was going to suffocate and the man wasn't going to stop and Please, San Lang, Hua Cheng, anyone, anyone, please, get him out, San Lang, San Lang, San Lang—

"Gege! I'm here, I'm here, you're safe, gege!"

"San Lang!" Xie Lian choked, because he was hardly breathing, choking on mud and coffin air and his own tears.

Hua Cheng moved closer, reached out slowly, as always nervous about touching when Xie Lian was in the grips of a nightmare but Xie Lian couldn't take it, he just *couldn't,* not now, he needed out, he needed someone to pull him out, anyone, he needed San Lang, *he needed* .

He lunged out of the bed, grasping, and would have fallen straight to the floor if Hua Cheng hadn't leapt forward to catch him and pull him from the bed and into his lap. Xie Lian went easily, still focused entirely on sucking in air. He pressed himself agaisnt Hua Cheng chest, fingers clawing into Hua Cheng's sleeping robes.

More and more butterflies were appearing, washing the room in light to the point that it was almost too bright and Xie Lian pressed his face against Hua Cheng's neck.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Xie Lian sobbed, which wasn't unusual on a night like this, when words and thoughts and coherency seemed to be draining out through the hole that no longer existed in the back of his head.

Not unusual, but he couldn't recall one that had left him quite so shaken in a long time.

"I'm so sorry, please, *please* ..."

"Gege has nothing to apologise for. You're safe here, you're safe, you're in your room, you're in Paradise Manor, you're safe."

It couldn't stop his choking tears, it just made it worse. "I know that, I know, I— I don't know what's wrong with me, it's over. I know it's over. I know he's gone. I know it. But…"

"Everyone gets nightmares, gege, it's fine," Hua Cheng said, holding Xie Lian all the tighter to his chest as he ran his fingers through his hair. "Your mind is still healing, of course it remembers things strangely. No need to apologise, I'm happy to be awake with gege."

Xie Lian made a deeply frustrated noise, even if he knew what Hua Cheng said was, maddeningly, true.

For a while they just sat like that, Hua Cheng's fingers in his hair, and Xie Lian so exhausted and yet so completely incapable of sleep that he felt he would rather claw his own eyes out that suffer the way his eyelids drooped and jerked upon in turns while his body stayed taut with nerves.

"You'd feel better if you laid down in bed again," Hua Cheng tried, though the very thought of it made Xie Lian tremble. It made him imagine lying on a filthy sleeping mat in a hug, imagine lying under a crushing body, imagine lying deep beneath the earth in a coffin.

"Will you stay?" he asked, voice small and dark and muffled. Because he couldn't do this alone. He couldn't. He couldn't go into the coffin alone, couldn't go into the hut alone. "Just until I fall asleep?"

"Of course I'll stay with gege," Hua Cheng said, like it was the most natural thing.

"You don't have to, if it's too much, if I—"

"This isn't too much. Nothing is too much."

Xie Lian snuffled pathetically once more but made no effort to move. Eventually it was Hua Cheng who stood, lifting Xie Lian effortlessly with him and laying him gently in the bed. He made to move back, as if he was thinking of kneeling by the bed or sitting in the chair to keep his nighttime vigil that way, but that wasn't what Xie Lian wanted. The very thought of that sort of distance, a bottomless abyss stretching between them and attempting to swallow Xie Lian whole, was enough to make him want to scream in terror all over again. He grabbed Hua Cheng's hand and didn't let go until Hua Cheng hesitantly moved towards the bed again.

With very careful movements, Hua Cheng lowered himself into the bed, and then under the cover when Xie Lian began attempting to straighten the mess he had made of the bedding.

"Is this okay?" Hua Cheng asked.

It was the best thing in the world. It felt like a grave's worth of dirt had been lifted from his chest and he could finally breathe again. Xie Lian pressed himself right against Hua Cheng's side, no energy or thought left to be ashamed of his clinginess. If it was a problem, it could be

tomorrow's problem. Hua Cheng, for his part, moved effortlessly with Xie Lian, as if his limbs were controlled by Xie Lian's slightest whims. He curled around Xie Lian, until he felt entirely bracketed by the Ghost King, surrounded by a protective wall that kept him away from the rest of the world.

He did not believe there was a single thing in three realms that could pull him from Hua Cheng's arms, not if Hua Cheng didn't want to let go.

Somehow, no matter how patiently Xie Lian waited for him to tire of his new acquisition, Hua Cheng never seemed to want to let go. Not when Xie Lian was disgusting and filthy, not when he got too excited about strange things, not when his headaches kept him silent and unmoving, not even now when he was woken in the night and clung to like a doll.

If Xie Lian reached out, Hua Cheng always, always reached back.

"This is okay?" Hua Cheng asked again, as if Xie Lian wasn't the most comfortable he could ever imagine being.

"Mm," he agreed because his eyes still felt raw and gritty and painful, but they no longer felt the need to spring open the moment he dared to close them. "...Is San Lang comfortable?"

"...This one is very comfortable."

Well, then that was all good. Xie Lian let his eyes close properly. He let his muscles loosen, one by one, trusting that Hua Cheng would hold on even if he let go. And, little by little, he let those old fears fade under the bright, flickering light of the butterflies that danced somewhere beyond his closed eyelids.

Xie Lian slept.

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It wasn't long before Hua Cheng, who was still awake and lying perfectly still, ran into a whole new dilemma. He had promised to stay only as long as it took for Xie Lian to fall asleep. And, well, His Highness was most certainly asleep now. But he wasn't sure how he could extract himself without waking Xie Lian back up, which would be absolutely unacceptable.

Would it be better for him to stay where he was? But he had always been very careful to leave in the evenings and to not enter the room while Xie Lian was still sleeping unless it was absolutely necessary. He could guess at what thoughts and memories plagued his god, and he did not intend to be a strange man lurking near him while he slept. What would His Highness think, if he woke up with another body plastered right against his side? Hua Cheng couldn't do that to him! But Xie Lian was tucked right up against him, sleeping on his arm, and he couldn't move either!

He was left with little to do but sit and stew in indecision.

This did, however, mean that he was right there when the next nightmare struck about a sichen later. He heard the moment His Highness's breathing began to come heavier, and felt the moment when Xie Lian's body stiffened and began to twitch in his sleep. Xie Lian groaned, made a wordless plea as he tried to flinch away from something beyond his sight, a flailing arm smacking against Hua Cheng as Xie Lian twitched backwards against him.

Hua Cheng stayed perfectly still, muscles locked like stone, prickling anxiety about how Xie Lian's disorientation would take this sort of proximity, this sort of violation, up until the moment Xie Lian sighed and eased.

"San Lang?" came his sleep-thick voice.

"Gege."

"Mm."

"Would you like me to leave?" he whispered, still not daring to move so much as a muscle.

The tension returned to Xie Lian in an instant. "No, please," he murmured, still sounding half-asleep.

"I don't want to scare you."

"Scared? Why would I be scared if it's you?"

Hua Cheng wanted to take those words and carve out a place beneath his ribs to keep them forever. Instead did his best to delicately answer His Highness's question. "I don't want to stir bad memories."

"...Oh," said Xie Lian, taking his meaning. "I… no, I'd never think that! Not of you! I couldn't! I… it's different. He… That is, San Lang is cold. And you don't breathe. Before… there were always hot hands or… or a hot breath and…" Xie Lian wasn't looking at him while he spoke, but he was back to being taut against Hua Cheng's arm — exactly what Hua Cheng had so clumsily failed to avoid. "I could never mistake you. And if you're here, it means no one else is."

"Oh."

Xie Lian breathed out while Hua Cheng lay there and tried to process this declaration. It didn't help that Xie Lian was easing back so that his back was pressed against Hua Cheng's side — intentionally seeking out the contact — and began to settle back into sleep once more.

Hua Cheng was left to drift on what was probably a cloud of pure, unadulterated euphoria. Even sleepy and scared, his god had *known* him. And not just known him, but considered him a reliable protector even while so vulnerable.

This was the realisation of everything Hua Cheng had ever wanted for the past eight hundred years. To think there had once been a little ghost fire in agony over being unable to warm its god, and now it was that very chill that its god sought solace in. To think it had once watched

its god go through the worst agonies and been unable to do so much as touch, and now its very body was the shield protecting its god.

The next time his god began to stir, he tentatively ran a cool hand down his arm, touched the back of his hand, and as if he had woven a beautiful spell His Highness had immediately sighed and stilled.

Hua Cheng wanted to light incense and thank every single choice in his life that had led him to being so perfectly shaped to be of use now.

This was how the strange new evening routine began. It wasn't every night at first, since both of them were too flustered to dare bring it up initially, but then Xie Lian would wake from another nightmare and ask Hua Cheng to stay, or Hua Cheng would notice of how the afternoon had been a particularly exhaustive, disorienting one and suggest that maybe he should stick around, just in case. Eventually it grew more and more common, to the point that Hua Cheng rarely did anything other than lay himself in bed next to his god, curl his arms protectively around him, and drift into sleep with the knowledge that his god was as safe and comfortable as he could possibly make him.

Sometimes he wondered if he should feel guilty about this. If he was taking something he didn't deserve. Sometimes he thought back to that conversation with Black Water and Xie Lian's dismissal of it — if he really didn't understand the depths of Hua Cheng's devotion, then was this a liberty he shouldn't be taking? Was he yet one more person taking advantage?

But if he said something, would that mean forcing Xie Lian to deny himself the comfort he was reaping from Hua Cheng? Wasn't it better for Hua Cheng to swallow his own guilt, for him to bear that and deal with it, rather than subject his god to it?

In the end, he did nothing though and said nothing. He was, perhaps, too inherently selfish of a creature not to lap up these indulgences like a starved thing. If he could spend the rest of his existence acting as pillow, nightlight, and guard dog for Xie Lian it would surely be the most blissful life imaginable.

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Ever since the two of them had regularly started sharing a bed, Xie Lian found he was much more likely to fall quickly back to sleep after a nightmare. Sleeping next to Hua Cheng was a little like always having the cool side of a pillow to rest your head against. And what Xie Lian had sleepily confessed that one night was very true: he had spent many, many nights in recent memory pressed up close against a living man. It was a memory he could still feel on his skin, especially if he had not had a recent enough bath. It was hot, and sticky, skin plastered to skin, breath almost a liquid pouring against the back of Xie Lian's neck. Heated shame as body parts touched and chafed and rubbed. Hua Cheng wasn't like that. He was cool, and still, and safe. Even at his sleepiest, Xie Lian wasn't likely to ever mistake the two — the sensations were simply antithetical to one another.

Unfortunately, even Hua Cheng's presence did not *always* guarantee that Xie Lian would be able to sleep again, and some nights were beyond salvaging even with the Ghost King's grounding preference.

"Gege?" Hua Cheng murmured, arms constricting briefly as Xie Lian tried to sit up without waking his bedmate.

Xie Lian wanted to sigh in dismay — the one drawback of this new arrangement was that it was much harder to get up and wait out a nightmare without waking Hua Cheng when he was pressed as close as a pillow.

"I'm just getting a drink," Xie Lian whispered, running a hand comfortingly along Hua Cheng's cool arm.

"I can get it," Hua Cheng murmured.

"No, no, don't trouble yourself, go back to sleep."

Hua Cheng didn't respond, but his arms did slip away to give Xie Lian space to get up. Xie Lian was always at his dizziest after a nightmare, so he had to stand and move very slowly, reaching for furniture and walls to help him get to the water pitcher on the dresser across the room. A butterfly flew helpfully in front of him, keeping his way lit.

He stood at the dresser and drank his fill and tried to let his mind grow empty and calm, to spill away the feeling of splintered wood beneath his nails in the same way the water poured from the pitcher. Drinking water sometimes helped, since he had spent so much time in both the hut and the coffin dehydrated. Night-cooled water was sweet, like a little treat just for himself in the middle of the night.

Even this wasn't enough though, not tonight, because it felt less like water and more like bile in his mouth, and he found himself thinking about lying on the floor of the hut with vomit in his mouth and that was revolting enough that he had to put his cup down and step away. Perhaps he would get the comb and brush his hair instead.

He nearly startled himself into falling to the floor when he realised that Hua Cheng's eyes were open and watching him from the bed, the butterfly's light reflected on their dark irises.

"You haven't gone back to sleep," Xie Lian scolded.

"Really? I thought I was dreaming."

The smile that forced itself onto Xie Lian's lips felt completely out of place, and he would almost be annoyed with Hua Cheng's shameless teasing disrupting his mood if that weren't exactly what he had been trying futilely to do himself.

"I won't be able to sleep, not for a while. I'm going to stay up for a bit."

"May I join you?"

"It'll be dull."

Hua Cheng, who was still lying in the bed, just stared up at him with hopeful eyes, like a dog waiting to be told it could come. Really, such a shameless tease.

"If you like," Xie Lian acquiesced, as if having Hua Cheng with him wasn't the ideal situation, however selfish it might be.

Hua Cheng sprang up cheerfully.

"Is gege hungry? I could call for food."

"No, no, please don't wake Yin Yu again for this!"

"Gege is heading somewhere… is there something you do when you can't sleep?"

"I was just going to get the comb from the bathing chamber, actually. It, ah, helps to keep my hands busy, sometimes."

"I'll get it," Hua Cheng said immediately. "I'll brush your hair as well, if you like?"

How could Xie Lian possibly hope to refuse that? He agreed, and was urged to sit at the table while Hua Cheng hurried there and back. During that time, more butterflies had appeared and now flew in lazy patterns by the ceiling, lighting the room. While Xie Lian waited, he admired the way the light reflected on E-Ming which was leaning on the wall near the bed. Ever since they had been introduced in the armoury, Hua Cheng no longer kept E-Ming hidden and wore him on his waist, as had probably been his habit before Xie Lian had appeared in the Gambler's Den and disrupted things.

The eye of the blade was slit open a fraction, but closed again when it realised it had been spotted. It rattled noisily against the wall.

"Shush," Hua Cheng scolded, as he reappeared. He gave the blade a kick with his boot, making the sabre rattle all the more.

"San Lang," said Xie Lian, scolding in turn.

"Ignore it, it's being ridiculous," Hua Cheng said as he settled down behind Xie Lian with the comb.

"How so?"

"...It knows something is scaring you and it wants to fight it."

Xie Lian swore he could feel his heart swelling in his chest. Immediately he scooted away from Hua Cheng and towards the sword, cooing his thanks and appreciation for the blade. Its eye was open fully now and looked like it would begin to tear up if it weren't made of metal. Hua Cheng sighed.

"Maybe I could polish it while you're brushing my hair," mused Xie Lian. "And then I'm not sitting idle. It would let me keep my hands busy, since you have the comb."

"You'll spoil it…"

"And? San Lang seems quite set on spoiling me, after all."

Having no retort to that, Hua Cheng held out his hand and the sabre flew into it with so much eagerness that the smack of metal to flesh would have surely hurt a mortal. Hua Cheng just shook his head at his scimitar's antics.

"Behave," he warned it, and then to Xie Lian he said, "I'll fetch a cloth and some polish, if you're certain you want to waste your time on such a thing. I could always get something different from the armoury, if gege just wants to play with swords…"

"E-Ming will do perfectly," said Xie Lian firmly, reaching boldly for the scimitar. "I only got to see it for such a short period of time, last time, and it's your spiritual weapon. I want to get to know the sabre that keeps San Lang safe."

Hua Cheng relented, passing it off before rising and going to fetch the polish.

"Hello," Xie Lian said, as he arranged the blade in his lap.

Immediately the red eye was open, rolling around in its silver hilt for a moment before squinting happily up at Xie Lian, expression seeming to dance with joy. It really was too cute. He drew the sword, setting the scabbard aside so he could really appreciate the full, dangerous length of E-Ming — it really was the finest of blades, a first rate spiritual weapon. Xie Lian recalled Hua Cheng telling him about the rumours of E-Ming's creation but he wondered what the truth of it was. He didn't believe for a minute that it was bloody human sacrifice, since neither Hua Cheng nor E-Ming seemed like the sort.

Before he could ponder further, Hua Cheng returned with the necessary tools, which he passed over to Xie Lian before arranging himself on his knees behind him. As the first brush of the comb pressed through his hair, Xie Lian stroked the first pass of the cloth down E-Ming's fine blade. It seemed to shiver in his lap.

E-Ming was, without a doubt, the most amusing weapon to clean and polish which was saying a lot because Xie Lian had always loved such a chore, even as a child. Back in the Palace of Xianle he could happily lose hours in the armoury taking down different weapons and studying the best ways to care for them and going through the motions with a type of meditative peace. But E-Ming was better than all of them, because it responded to it like a little animal!

It was entertaining to try to guess what the scimitar preferred by its little movements and eye rolls. He worked the cloth along the detailing of the hilt, tried brisk, round strokes along the blade as well as long, smooth passes. He was careful to avoid the eye though, concerned it would hurt if he accidentally poked it.

As he worked, he realised that he really had entirely forgotten the shape and feel of the nightmare that had woken him. *You did quite good at getting rid of what was scaring me after all* , he thought affectionately at the sabre.

"You know, gege, the first time we were discussing preferred weapons we were interrupted."

Xie Lian considered this. He and Hua Cheng often discussed weapons, since they both had a passion for them, and he wasn't sure exactly which time he was referring to.

"In the armoury," Hua Cheng clarified. "When Black Water decided to make a nuisance of himself."

At that Xie Lian grimaced. "You know, you really should invite him back. I'd like to apologise properly, now that I'm not quite so… disoriented."

Saying anything more than he had in the moment would have been entirely impossible, and even the days immediately after would probably not have been ideal — Xie Lian really hadn't been in the mood to meet strange, powerful people he didn't know. He preferred the singular strange, powerful person with whom he was sharing a house. But in the weeks that had passed since, Xie Lian was finding himself on much steadier footing, both physically and mentally, and was regretting how that first meeting had gone. Even though he surely wouldn't be staying at Paradise Manor long enough for it to matter, he felt he should try to be on good terms with Hua Cheng's friend.

"Gege shouldn't waste his time on that trash."

"It couldn't hurt… perhaps we could invite him to tea?"

"If gege likes…" said Hua Cheng, with a tone that suggested that he thought inviting a Ghost King to 'tea' was, perhaps, insane, but if it was Xie Lian suggesting it then it was, of course, an insanity that he was willing to entertain.

Choosing not to press the matter for now, Xie Lian said, "You mentioned we were interrupted though? Something about weapons?"

"En. I had asked if there was a weapon in the armoury you particularly fancied. You've had a lot of time to explore them by now, so there must be something that stands out?"

Xie Lian thought about it, but the more he thought the more impossible it became to make a decision. At the time he had thought that they were all masterpieces and exposure had only increased his conviction. Every time he thought "perhaps this one is best" another would immediately come to mind and he would have to switch his choice because it would be wrong not to say that one instead, only for the cycle to repeat. Even when he tried to cheat a little by choosing a favourite of each weapon type, he found he simply couldn't, they were all too impressive for different reasons and choosing one was to slander the rest!

"I really can't say," he finally admitted. "San Lang has such an impressive collection, they're all wonderful!"

"Originally, I was thinking gege didn't have any useful weapons on hand, so if there was anything you fancied you could just take it for yourself," said Hua Cheng as he continued to comb Xie Lian's hair, like he wasn't casually suggesting giving away something that would surely be the prize of any kingdom's treasury. "But since gege likes them all, I'll give them all to you."

Xie Lian nearly dropped E-Ming.

"No, no, I really couldn't!" he said, a little desperately because he knew Hua Cheng well enough by now to know, with absolute horror, that there was a very real danger that he was being serious. "I really don't use a blade anymore besides for when we play around after all, I haven't in years! And where would I ever put that many weapons?"

"That's an easy solution, I'll just give gege the armoury. You can keep them in there as we do now and take what you need when you want."

Frantic laughter bubbled and died in his throat. He really couldn't take Hua Cheng seriously or he would get light-headed from the implications! Instead he forced himself to calm down and pick up the polishing cloth again. To make a claim like that, Hua Cheng *must* be joking, and he felt a little silly for having thought otherwise. After all, it was one thing to impulsively give away a sword, but it wasn't like Xie Lian could stick an entire room into his pack when it was time for him to leave!

"I couldn't take an armoury, how would I carry it?" he said, teasing back. "Even I'm not that strong!"

The comb paused for the briefest moment before continuing its rhythm.

"Ah, gege is thinking about leaving soon, then?" Hua Cheng asked, tone light, and it made Xie Lian's stomach swoop with horror.

It was always in the back of his mind, of course, but he didn't want to bring it to the forefront of Hua Cheng's!

He focused on stroking E-Ming. Maybe it was better to talk about. It didn't hurt to know what was coming.

"Not particularly," he said honestly, "but when San Lang is ready to have his house back then what would happen to all those fine weapons? Weapons like that need constant maintenance, and I wouldn't be able to do that when I leave. And if they're mine, how could I ask Hua Chengzhu to do my chores for me? Wouldn't that be irresponsible?"

"Then gege could just stay and keep taking care of them."

It was too tempting of a thought. The thought of waking up every morning in such a soft bed, of eating such good food and getting to feed someone else, of getting to spend every day with Hua Cheng and to fall asleep every night knowing that he could not possibly be safer because he had a Ghost King at his back. But that was impossible for so many reasons, and it would only hurt to dwell on it. While Xie Lian lived in the moment and enjoyed what he had when he had it, he wasn't so foolish as to try to hold onto it forever — it was in this manner that he had starved a Venerable of Empty Words after all! His survival, his ability not to become the monster he had been once so many centuries ago, depended on it!

"Surely San Lang doesn't want a house guest indefinitely," he said gently, trying to ensure that Hua Cheng's big talk wouldn't leave him feeling stuck.

For a few minutes, Hua Cheng just stroked the brush through Xie Lian's hair.

"If you want to leave, you can," he said, voice low in the night-softened room. "I'll take you wherever you want to go, ensure you have a good place to stay if you don't have somewhere waiting for you. Gege has already spent too long confined, of course I wouldn't presume to do so myself. Pray you haven't assumed you couldn't leave if you wanted to."

Xie Lian sighed, and placed E-Ming down on the table so he could turn fully around and face Hua Cheng. Their knees bumped, and Hua Cheng put his hands meekly in his lap as he met Xie Lian's eyes. Xie Lian was startled by how contrite he looked, as if he was the one doing something wrong here.

"Of course I know I can leave when I want," Xie Lian said. It had been so long since Xie Lian had had the slightest doubts about Hua Cheng's kindness and generosity that implying otherwise just felt ridiculous. "And of course I don't want to go anywhere else. Where could be better?"

Hua Cheng's expression was searching.

"Gege wants to stay?"

"En. As long as San Lang will have me. But please don't feel obligated."

Shoulders easing slightly and smile returning, Hua Cheng said, "Careful what you say, gege, you know I'm a horrible, selfish Ghost King. I'll snatch you up and keep you forever if you say things like that. I'll add you to my armoury and keep you with my treasures and never let anyone else touch you ever again."

Xie Lian just smiled back. If Hua Cheng thought that was some sort of threat he was sorely mistaken. Xie Lian had long since concluded that that was the best possible life he could imagine for himself.

"We should go back to sleep," he said instead, because his chest was feeling warm and syrupy and his nightmares were long gone. Hua Cheng agreed easily.

Dawn was approaching by the time they had settled back into bed, but sleep was tugging enticingly at Xie Lian by the time he had settled back down. He was resting once again against Hua Cheng's cool skin, E-Ming was once again leaning restfully against the wall, and the room was a perfect little bubble of peace. Really, if Hua Cheng wasn't careful, he really would never get rid of Xie Lian.

And as long as he had an indefinite invitation to stay, he may as well start planning for what he would like to do next.

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Xie Lian ran a hand down his robes, unnecessarily straightening them once more while staring into the mirror with dissatisfaction.

He wasn't the sort to worry about what he wore — as long as it covered him, he really wasn't in a place to complain! Muddy, tattered, thin, what did it matter to him? Clothing was

clothing and it could either be washed or mended or eventually replaced if necessary and he was just thankful to have it. Even more thankful if it was warm enough to keep out the chill. What he had now in Paradise Manor was frankly astounding and didn't bear thinking about. The first few days his clothes had been laid out for him, but it hadn't been long before Hua Cheng had shown Xie Lian the robes and belts and accessories that were, apparently, free for him to use.

At first Xie Lian had assumed he was seeing double again, because only that explained the staggering number in front of him. But no, Hua Cheng just had a ridiculous number of spare robes.

Not that they were actually spare robes. Spare robes implied they were either Hua Cheng's which he was lending to Xie Lian — clearly not the case, they didn't match his usual style — or else that they were kept for guests in general. That might have made more sense, if they didn't match Xie Lian's measurements to a rather suspicious degree. There was really no denying it, when Hua Cheng said they were his robes he hadn't been lying or exaggerating. Compared to trying to gift him an armoury, he supposed this was small change, but it still would have cost a fortune to have had made up. It was overwhelming to say the least.

(And, secretly, selfishly, a little gratifying. At the beginning it had seemed like the overindulgence of a Ghost King that was willing to put too much money and effort into strange hobbies, but now, after hearing that Hua Cheng truly would be happy to have Xie Lian stay here with him indefinitely, the meaning… changed. It no longer felt like too many robes for a temporary guest, but like a fully fleshed out wardrobe for someone who would have the time to linger and try them all.)

(It was almost too much to even think about, because that risked thinking too far into the future and imagining which of these robes he might try wearing in a week, a month, a year, a decade from now. Nothing lasted that long for Xie Lian, but even just the suggestion that Hua Cheng was *okay* with that sort of thought made him want to dissolve into a happy little puddle of joy.)

But now, faced with so many choices and so little practice at making such decisions, he was agonising over what to wear. Because he had a fantastically bad first impression to try to mend.

"Gege looks very handsome like this," offered Hua Cheng, who was lounging on the bed and tossing something idly from hand to hand as he supervised Xie Lian's quiet panic.

"San Lang is not a very impartial judge."

"But *I* think gege looks handsome, and who cares what that overgrown fish thinks?"

"You're not the one I threw at a door. I would like to be a better host this time. Well, not host I suppose," Xie Lian amended with an awkward laugh, "since this isn't my house, of course. But a better acquaintance at least."

There really were no words to describe what he was to Hua Cheng, especially not after Hua Cheng had basically given him a carte blanche to stay in Paradise Manor as long as he liked.

Between two immortals, that was not an inconsequential thing, not by a long shot. So, it was just easier *not* to describe it.

Whatever you called it though, Xie Lian felt like some fretful wife trying to put on a good tea. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"You can be the host, it's not like I would be letting him slither back here again if gege hadn't requested it."

"If I'm the host, what will you be?" Xie Lian asked as he finally gave up on trying to decide the appropriate robes to wear to something like this. It probably didn't really matter anyway.

"Arm candy?" Hua Cheng suggested, with too much enthusiasm.

Xie Lian burst out laughing.

"Why is gege laughing? I can be very pretty arm candy," Hua Cheng pouted, rising to his feet and stowing away the toy with which he was fidgeting. "You could accessorise with me. How's this?"

Lately Hua Cheng had taken to wearing slightly different forms around him, though all of them were obvious variations on his original San Lang skin. This one was wholly different. The figure was feminine and curvy, as was the cascade of black hair that fell loose and voluptuous around his shoulders. The robes he was wearing now were practically dripping off him.

"Is this pretty, gege?"

"Of course, of course, San Lang is very pretty," Xie Lian reassured, indulgence thick in his voice.

That was all the encouragement Hua Cheng needed to keep showing off. He went through a half dozen skins, some more masculine, some more feminine, but all of them stunningly beautiful. Even someone like Xie Lian, who had never really given physical features like that much consideration, could appreciate the carefully cultivated aesthetics of each form that appeared before him. And somehow, knowing that it was Hua Cheng beneath each other, preening for *Xie Lian's* approval, made a deeper appreciation stir within him. Something that made him want to reach out and touch. The feeling was so hot and sudden that it made his stomach twist sickeningly and he had to clench his hands in his lap before he did something truly foolish. Clenched hands didn't stop his cheeks from heating up though, and he was sure the uncalled for blush must be visible from across the estate… especially given how Hua Cheng paused in his fashion show to eye Xie Lian curiously.

At the very least, Xie Lian could appreciate how Hua Cheng had successfully distracted him from his fretting, even if he wanted to shove his face in his hands and groan.

"Or I could be something scary," Hua Cheng suggested lightly. "I could be your bodyguard instead, who'll cut down anyone who dares offend Dianxia. A fearsome form."

Hua Cheng said this with a dangerous smile as his form shifted once more, his face settling into something sharp and less symmetrical than his other skins. This form was quite different from the previous forms in many ways, in fact. It was tall, and slightly more mature than some of the soft, youthful faces Hua Cheng had been trying on. It had outgrown the last of its baby fat, and had sharper angles. One intense, dark eye watched Xie Lian carefully from amid a cascade of loose, dark hair, while the other one was completely hidden by an eyepatch.

There was more weight behind this, more tension than any of the other frivolous skins he had put on and discarded like costumes. All of Hua Cheng's playfulness had disappeared as soon as he had changed to this form; what remained was only the illusion of it.

"I thought San Lang wanted to be scary?" Xie Lian said, who was still feeling rather aggrieved by how flustered Hua Cheng had made him and was willing to give as good as he got. "This one is the prettiest skin yet."

Hua Cheng startled. Opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"Will San Lang wear this skin then?" Xie Lian asked boldly. "I like this one best."

And suddenly the toy was back in Hua Cheng's hands, being tossed up and down nonchalantly, as if he couldn't bear to have his hands empty. It was a ring, Xie Lian noted idly, while Hua Cheng affected a look of complete casualness.

"En, if that's what gege wants."

"It is. You won't mind being in your true form in front of Lord Black Water?" Because there was no point in pretending they didn't know what this was. Hua Cheng had finally come through on his promise.

Hua Cheng's feigned nonchalance began to thaw into an actual smile. "Who cares what he thinks? Gege's opinion is the only one that matters. If gege likes this form, then this is the form I'll wear. Now that that's decided, what of gege? Have you finished choosing what you're going to wear, or do I get to see you model more robes?"

Hua Cheng really had been enjoying it a little too much, Xie Lian thought. He had been a very captive audience each time Xie Lian had stepped out from behind the privacy screen to examine what he was wearing in the bronze mirror against the wall. When Xie Lian had suggested that Hua Cheng might have better things to do, he had insisted very firmly that he absolutely did not. That thought, coupled with the feeling he had just gotten from watching Hua Cheng try on different forms for him, struck him with a feeling that he had to fight to quash. That was not a thought he could entertain. Whatever exactly that thought even was. He was not going to examine it, he did not want to make sense of it, he wanted to very definitely not think about it again. All he knew in that moment was that he definitely wouldn't be able to try on any more outfits, not without embarrassing himself in some way.

"I think this one is good," he said with as much dignity as he could muster. He wasn't even positive which outfit he had last tried on.

"Would gege like any jewellery to go with it?"

"Ah… no, no, I'm fine without. The piercings I had in my ears grew over long ago, after all."

"Well, if gege doesn't want to wear earrings, perhaps something else?"

"Did San Lang have something in mind?"

Hua Cheng grinned and flicked something over to him. Xie Lian caught it in the air and inspected it. It was the ring Hua Cheng had been toying with, and Xie Lian might have expected some sort of joke if it weren't for the actual appearance of the ring itself.

This was no toy.

Precious objects had abounded in the Kingdom of Xianle which had valued beauty and refinement above all else. Xie Lian had been handling priceless jewels and objects of unparalleled craftsmanship since he was a child, his life surrounded and enriched by their colours and artistry and beauty. So though he could not immediately identify what type of stone he currently held — perhaps diamond — he knew without a doubt that it was exquisite. Between how perfectly clear it was and the level of skill that must have gone into getting such a perfect shape and lustre, it was truly a peerless object. Finer than anything he had seen, never mind felt, since he was last in the Upper Court.

Somehow he expected to see that he had accidentally rubbed smudges onto it when he spun it in his fingers.

Hastily he moved to press it back into Hua Cheng's hands, though he seemed reluctant to take it back.

"Really, I can't wear such a thing! San Lang, that's priceless! I'm not used to wearing rings anymore, what if it dropped from my finger and I didn't notice? Or if I grew dizzy and cracked it when I fell? I really can't!"

"It's just a trinket, gege," said Hua Cheng dismissively, once again tossing it in air now that it had been forced back to him. He seemed entirely disinterested in it. "If you lose it, then it deserves to be lost. If you crack it, then let it be cracked. That you fell at all would be a bigger shame."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Why did it feel like today in particular that Hua Cheng had decided to grab his heart and twist it into strange, foreign shapes? Had something truly shifted so greatly between them, when Xie Lian realised he wouldn't be expected to leave? Or was Hua Cheng's capricious nature just coming to odds with Xie Lian's general fretfulness today?

Really, he needed to relax, Hua Cheng was always playful, this was no different. All these strange feelings seemed to be centring around dressing, so perhaps Xie Lian would feel more at ease once they left the bedroom.

So, with as much teasing as he could muster, hoping to turn Hua Cheng's attention to other things, he said, "San Lang really does collect the most unusual 'trinkets', doesn't he?"

"Just baubles to fill space and time with, gege."

Xie Lian laughed in acknowledgement, as he pretended to face the mirror once more and make sure the robes were laying properly across his shoulders.

"En! Well, I'm fortunate that this is your habit or I would have really been in trouble that day! Shall we carry on, San Lang? I'm sure there's more for us to do!"

But Hua Cheng didn't move. He was giving Xie Lian a strange look. "Ah? What does gege mean?"

"If we're going to host Lord Black Water, then—"

"*Not* about him! About what gege said before."

"Ah? Well, when we meet in the Gambler's Den, I'm fortunate you could identify a banished god and was willing to collect this one. I don't like to think of how things might have gone otherw— San Lang?"

The bronze of this mirror was so finely polished that it was easy for him to see the moment when the ring, which Hua Cheng had been tossing to himself the entire time, slipped from his fingers and bounced somewhere across the floor. Xie Lian's first instinct was to dive for it, before something so precious became lost, but Hua Cheng was staring at his reflection with an expression of deepening horror. Xie Lian spun to face him fully, startled and more than a little concerned about what could have come over Hua Cheng so suddenly.

"San Lang, are you okay?"

"'Collect'," Hua Cheng repeated, voice sounding distant. "What does gege mean?"

Not remotely understanding the question, Xie Lian scrambled for an answer. "Ah… how else to put it…? You already had Yin Yu after all and Lord Black Water said you'd been looking for me, right? I can't imagine there's been that many banished gods between my fall and now, so it can't have been easy to have found either of us. I'm lucky San Lang wanted to collect something as exotic as gods and was willing to take me in."

Hua Cheng wasn't breathing. Which wasn't actually unusual, but somehow right now the lack of it felt heavy and stifling in the room.

"...San Lang? Are you alright? You know I'm not upset, right? I've known since—"

"You've known… you've thought—? That you… That I… This whole time? Gege— Dianxia —!"

Somehow this was even worse than the silence! Hua Cheng looked even paler than usual and there was a fine tremor building in his hands. In fact, Xie Lian rather thought he looked the way Xie Lian felt when he was about to faint.

As if to prove that vague thought accurate, Hua Cheng suddenly collapsed.

If this was what Hua Cheng went through everytime Xie Lian got dizzy he owed his Ghost King some apologies because he really thought his heart was going to leap out of his throat. His only solace was that Hua Cheng didn't appear to have actually blacked out, instead only dropping to his knees as he stared up at Xie Lian with wide-eyed horror.

Xie Lian hastened down next to him, hands reaching to touch his face without a second thought, needing to assure himself that Hua Cheng was well. As well as could be hoped. But to drop like that so suddenly…!

"San Lang, I really, really don't understand what's wrong, please say something!"

Hua Cheng dragged a hand through his hair, so roughly it had to have hurt. When he spoke, it sounded like something was choking him. "Say something— I should have said something!" Hua Cheng was speaking more to himself than Xie Lian, his gaze looking distant and panicked. "I knew— but I didn't think—! Gege, you thought you were something I wanted to *collect* ?" he said, voice cracking in horrible ways over that last word.

Yes, of course, seemed like it was probably the wrong answer, given Hua Cheng's stricken expression even if it was entirely true. Xie Lian struggled to make sense of where he had gone so wrong. He had offered no condemnation, and surely Hua Cheng couldn't think he was unhappy with the way things were, did he? Xie Lian understood, of course, that he and Hua Cheng were close by now and that Hua Cheng went out of his way to ensure Xie Lian's comfort and happiness, so really what was wrong? This response to a misunderstanding seemed too extreme!

Xie Lian took a calming breath, trying to project that same assurance that Hua Cheng always somehow found when it was Xie Lian who was panicking over something that must seem inconsequential to anyone but himself. It was much harder to do from this side, Hua Cheng made it look so easy.

"Everything is alright, San Lang." *You're safe* , was what Hua Cheng always told him. It was on the tip of his tongue but that didn't seem to be the issue right now even though Xie Lian would say it a hundred times over if he thought it might help. He would do anything to ensure Hua Cheng was safe, safe from whatever was now upsetting him. "Explain it to me. I believe we're misunderstanding one another, but that's not dire, is it? You're still you and I'm still me. Just explain."

"Does gege think I would have left him on that floor if I hadn't been… 'collecting gods'?" Hua Cheng said, voice bitter, hateful, but somehow not towards Xie Lian. This felt like a knife that twisted inward.

"I… don't know," Xie Lian confessed. "I did wonder, at first, why you would bother to do what you did. After I realised you knew I was a god — and that Yin Yu was one as well — I made an assumption. I can see that it was perhaps an inaccurate one…"

When Hua Cheng next spoke, his voice was almost a growl. It made the hair on the back of Xie Lian's neck stand on end. "Did *Yin Yu* say that that was what you—"

"No! He didn't say anything about this. I only assumed… You obviously knew something about me, and Lord Black Water said you had been intentionally looking for me. Why would you do that, if you didn't have an interest in old, banished gods? I can't imagine there's many records of me anywhere but ancient, obscure texts at this point, it must have taken some dedicated study."

"I saved Dianxia only because he's Dianxia. Not for any other reason. Because it was you." Hua Cheng shuddered under Xie Lian's hands. He was in pain, Xie Lian realised. His face was twisted as if in agony, and his hands were clenched into fists against his thighs. "I should have been clear. I suspected you had… that you might not have understood Black Water's words. I chose not to say anything. I was selfish. I let you think—!" He swallowed convulsively, the breath that he needed for speaking coming in a shaky lack of rhythm.

Xie Lian had done this. It might have been unintentional, might have been a misguided thought or careless word, but he had caused this hurt. Hua Cheng, who had been so bright and brilliant, laughing and teasing so easily moments ago, now looked like he was writhing in the greatest of agonies. Xie Lian's carelessness had caused a crack to form, and he was frantic to fix it. To make this right. With no better solution, he ran his hand through Hua Cheng's hair, simply because that was what Hua Cheng did for him.

"Don't act like it was so bad, San Lang."

"I made Dianxia feel he was some sort of *object* for me to do with as I pleased! It couldn't be worse!" he snapped, and then reeled back when he realised what he had done. Xie Lian held on stubbornly so that he couldn't pull away entirely.

"San Lang, listen," he said, as firmly as he could manage, reaching back to a voice he hadn't needed to use in a very long time. Not since he had been the Guoshi of an unruly prince who wouldn't heed his lessons. Hua Cheng's gaze immediately and obediently snapped back to Xie Lian's. "You didn't make me feel anything of the sort. You made me feel cared for. You made me feel protected. You made me comfortable and calm and *happy* , San Lang."

And that was no small thing. His recent past had been exclusively a thing of confusion and pain, he had been as starved for comfort and calm and joy as he had been for food. More so, perhaps, because at least the man had dropped food for him occasionally. He had never offered a shred of happiness. Even outside recent events though, even though Xie Lian knew how to find his moments of happiness and contentment and appreciation for the world, he still couldn't honestly say when the last time he had truly laughed had been. He couldn't say when the last time he had been so excited to wake up in the morning had been. He truly, *truly* could not remember. That he had any of that now, was thanks entirely to Hua Cheng.

"I may have misunderstood the details, but I did not misunderstand any of that. I never thought you would treat me like an object, or I would have left long ago. So don't misunderstand me. I meant it when I said I wanted to be here, San Lang. I don't want to be anywhere else. As a trinket or a guest or a friend, call it whatever you like, I like this and I like you. If you say you saved me simply because it's me then… then that makes me really happy! I'm not sure what I did to deserve that, but I'm grateful for it! And I'm being just as sincere when I say I like being with San Lang just because it's San Lang, and that's it. Alright?"

Hua Cheng shivered, head bowing slightly. "Alright, gege."

Hua Cheng didn't sound like he entirely believed it, but Xie Lian was at least relieved to hear that he was once again gege and not dianxia. This hardly answered all of Xie Lian's questions — if anything it spurred entirely new ones! Was it because Hua Cheng was already friends with Yin Yu and had pitied him for the shared punishment? Was it because he had simply been disgusted by the man's treatment of him? Or… if it was because he was "Dianxia", had he simply been so enthralled by those old stories that he had taken them too much to heart? Truly thought of him as a God-Pleasing Crown Prince who should be lifted from the filth? If that was the case, he could only hope not to disappoint expectations.

Regardless, he could rein in his curiosity for the time being. Hua Cheng seemed completely wrung out and Xie Lian could sympathise with the feeling. Instead he just continued to kneel next to Hua Cheng and reached out to pull him closer. Hua Cheng let himself be pulled, but he didn't otherwise move. He didn't lift his arms to wrap them around Xie Lian's back as he usually did when they held one another. Something seemed to make him hold back, but Hua Cheng had never given up on Xie Lian when he had been stiff or strange or distant, so Xie Lian just held him and stroked his hair as he shivered.

"I don't deserve this," Hua Cheng murmured miserably, his fists continuing to twist against his own robes rather than Xie Lian's.

"No one deserves it more," Xie Lian said firmly. "I'm sorry for making assumptions on San Lang's character. That wasn't fair to you."

"Gege had no reason to think otherwise. I gave him no reason to think otherwise…"

Xie Lian sighed. "You gave me every reason and I was being foolish about it. I suppose I was right in thinking that this was too far to go for an interesting new toy."

Hua Cheng made a pained noise in his throat, so Xie Lian supposed that joke hadn't, perhaps, been as funny as he had meant it. Mu Qing was right, he really did have an awful sense of humour.

"You don't need to kneel like this for me, gege should leave this one, apologies for reacting in such a way that it made gege feel he—"

Xie Lian tutted. "I would never be so careless with my San Lang. If you're upset, of course I want to help. If I caused you to be upset, all the more reason to put things right. If it would help to sit here like this all day, then we can."

Hua Cheng let out a breath, shoulders heaving beneath Xie Lian's embrace. Then he straightened. His expression showed no sign of his recent upset. "That's not necessary, gege. This one overreacted, I'm better now. It was only a shock to hear. Gege is of the utmost importance. And if we were to stay here all day, then gege would have to cancel his party."

Not entirely comforted, but understanding that Hua Cheng was likely feeling embarrassed at his loss of control and trying to return things to normal, Xie Lian accepted the redirection. He stood, and helped Hua Cheng to his feet as well. Hua Cheng's whole body seemed to want to

curl towards him, like a flower seeking sun, before he forced himself to straighten. Well, if Hua Cheng wouldn't allow himself the obvious comfort he wanted, then Xie Lian would just have to give it to him; they were both used to Xie Lian leaning against Hua Cheng after all. Sure enough, he felt Hua Cheng relax as he pressed himself up to his side.

"Alright, San Lang, before we get going with things, help me find that ring, I think I saw it roll over here…"

"Leave it, I can find it later," said Hua Cheng.

"No, no, I can see it's important to San Lang and I don't want to leave it on the floor. I want to wear it."

"Gege doesn't have to. If he doesn't want that ugly…"

"Hush, San Lang," he admonished. "It could never be called ugly, if anything it's too beautiful for someone like me. If San Lang really wants me to have it, then I'm honoured and want nothing more than to wear it. But perhaps on a chain, so I don't need to worry about something happening to it? I really would feel awful if something bad happened…"

Xie Lian managed to find the ring — undamaged, only lightly marred by dust! — under a shelf and by the time he stood Hua Cheng had procured a silver chain out of seemingly nowhere. Without allowing for any hesitation, Xie Lian neatly strung the ring on it and fastened the chain around his neck. The ring was the perfect weight, and hung comfortably against his chest.

"I'll take good care of it," he promised.

Hua Cheng shrugged, still looking vaguely uncomfortable. "Gege may do whatever he likes with it. Just keep it for fun."

"I'll take good care of it."

Hua Cheng cleared his throat. "Ah, we've probably messed around enough like this, if gege is still serious about being ready for that fish?"

Xie Lian almost considered cancelling their plans. He felt vaguely like he would rather drag Hua Cheng off to lie around in the garden in the sun or spar in the armoury until their arms ached, but decided they were perfectly capable of doing that later. Allowing things to go back to normal and stay true to their plans was probably the kindest thing he could do right now, rather than drawing any more attention to Hua Cheng's distress, so he let himself get swept back up in planning.

"You're right! Ah, what should I do next? I really don't know, I haven't done anything like this in so long…" Even as a prince, he really hadn't done much of this — planning events had always been the purvey of either a chief of staff, if it was a public affair, or his mother if it was a personal affair. Xie Lian, off studying at the Royal Holy Pavilion, had had next to nothing to do with such matters. "What does Lord Black Water like…?"

Hua Cheng shrugged. “All that glutton cares about is his stomach.”

Xie Lian brightened. That actually sounded perfect for both of the things he would like to do right now. “Ah! Perhaps we could prepare some extra snacks to go with tea then? Would San Lang like to help me cook?”

Whatever he might think about Black Water Sinks Ships sharing those snacks, Hua Cheng was at least very enthusiastic about joining Xie Lian in the kitchen.

They ended up getting quite a spread arranged before Black Water was due to arrive. Some of the snacks were things that were already in the kitchens, simple, pre-prepared things that could be stored and pulled out easily. Some Hua Cheng prepared himself, while Xie Lian was experimenting around with his own recipes. It had been so long since he had attended a formal tea like this, and he was trying to recreate some of the dishes he could remember from the Palace of Xianle.

Perhaps he was still a little unsettled from the strange misunderstanding in the bedroom, or perhaps he was simply allowing himself to become a little melancholic as his thoughts inevitably trailed off to his mother’s cooking, because suddenly Ruoye was butting into things, trying to get involved, and giving Xie Lian absolutely no room to think about anything else. He was forced to scold it and shoo it away as it got into his face and risked staining itself with sauce as it whipped itself around to take over cutting.

“Gege’s spiritual tool cuts well for silk,” Hua Cheng remarked from his own counter space. “Very useful.”

There was a faint rattling.

“Yes, Ruoye is quite skilled,” Xie Lian agreed. “It’s been just us for so long, we’re quite good at working together.” When the silk wasn’t going out of its way to be a nuisance, of course. It was going to be doused in soup stock if it wasn’t careful.

The rattling increased, but it seemed E-Ming couldn’t stand listening to another spiritual weapon be discussed above it for a moment longer. It whipped out of its sheath and darted across the counter to cut up the next stack of vegetables that Ruoye had been preparing to tackle.

“Amazing!” Xie Lian praised, inspecting the pieces which were perfectly sheared and surprisingly uniform. “I think you cut even better than Ruoye!”

If a scimitar could beam, E-Ming did. There was a definite aura of smugness to it. Ruoye was practically snapping itself in the air out of annoyance.

There was no peace in the kitchen after that but they did get through a lot of preparatory work remarkably quickly! And they would have lots of chopped vegetables to cook into later meals, considering how competitive the two spiritual weapons had gotten. They were soon wrapping up, with Xie Lian coaxing Ruoye to return to his arm while Hua Cheng impatiently snatched E-Ming out of the air and shoved it back into its scabbard.

He had only just succeeded in stifling the rambunctious E-Ming when he had to pause with the faraway expression of someone who was speaking through a communication array. It was followed by a grimace.

"Yin Yu says that Black Water has arrived. Gege is sure we can't just eat these on our own and send that sea slug back to his island?"

Xie Lian said nothing and just pressed a platter of food into Hua Cheng's arms — he wasn't foolish enough to try to carry it himself. If his bad luck didn't have him dropping it, his poor balance would. Even if Hua Cheng had declared himself the arm candy for the day, Xie Lian was happy to just cling to his arm while they made their way to the receiving room. Somehow, he couldn't help but suspect that after such a draining morning that Hua Cheng might appreciate the chance to be relied upon.

They were able to arrange the dishes and ensure the tea was steeping by the time a sullen-looking Black Water Sinks Ships was shown into the room.

Hua Cheng's mood had improved somewhat while in the kitchen together, but it dropped again notably at Lord Black Water's arrival. Xie Lian wondered if he had, perhaps, made a mistake in letting this carry on.

"You actually decided to use the door today," Hua Cheng remarked acidically.

Yin Yu made a quick exit, and Xie Lian couldn't help but fear he may have the right idea, given the look that Lord Black Water was shooting Hua Cheng in turn.

Attempting to cut off this problem at the head, Xie Lian stood and offered a salute in greeting. "Thank you for accepting our invitation."

"Gege's invitation," Hua Cheng corrected, not standing. Even seated though, he reached out a hand to help keep Xie Lian steady when the height change made him wobble.

"Let me introduce myself properly. I'm Xie Lian, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance and I apologise for our last meeting."

Whether it was actual courtesy, or fear of Hua Cheng's temper, or pity over what a sad display Xie Lian made, Black Water actually bowed back. "...I'm He Xuan. I… apologise for having startled you. It wasn't the intention."

"Pathetic, you call that an apology?" Hua Cheng demanded from where he lounged on the floor.

He Xuan glowered down at him, but Xie Lian kept talking blithely as he carefully lowered himself back down and pressed up against Hua Cheng. Silent comfort since he was obviously still feeling upset.

"I take it that that's a game you and San Lang play together? I had no idea, or I wouldn't have gotten in the way of it. I think I startled you as much as you startled me."

"It's not a game," both Devastation-ranked ghosts said in unison, which confirmed for Xie Lian that it most certainly was.

"Please help yourself to some food," Xie Lian said instead, gesturing.

That was all it took to truly break the ice. He Xuan finally took a seat at the table across from Hua Cheng and Xie Lian, picked up a pair of chopsticks, and enthusiastically dug into the food that had been arranged around the teapot.

"You caused a real mess, I hope you know," Hua Cheng said icily, as he began to eat as well, dishing himself up a healthy portion of several dishes that Xie Lian had made.

"And you certainly made me pay for it, didn't you?" He Xuan grumbled around the food he was eating.

"It wasn't that big of a deal, we fixed up the door just fine," Xie Lian pointed out.

"I was referring to Black Water's big mouth. You'd think a spy would be more discreet."

The chopsticks in He Xuan's hand froze, food halfway to his mouth. The smile Hua Cheng offered him was very sharp.

"Oh? Are you a spy of some sort?" Xie Lian asked, doing his best to keep the conversation going. "That sounds exciting, I didn't realise Ghost Kings did things like that."

He Xuan shoved the snack into his mouth without answering. Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He was pretty sure he heard He Xuan mutter something that sounded like *petty bitch* but it was a little hard to tell around the food.

It wasn't like Hua Cheng had been thrilled about this plan from the beginning, and clearly the misunderstanding that had been partially caused by He Xuan had not warmed him up to it. Well, the two Ghost Kings clearly had their own… unique friendship and way of interacting with each other, so Xie Lian decided it was best to leave them to it, though he did make an effort to steer the conversation to slightly safer waters. He wasn't sure Paradise Manor could survive the sort of 'play' a pair of truly annoyed Ghost Kings might get up to, and he had a feeling that it would become a real bother for Yin Yu if he didn't try to keep things at least somewhat in check.

The one thing he could say was that at least they weren't as combative as Feng Xin and Mu Qing!

He Xuan, it turned out, was not a particularly chatty person, and a lot of the discussion ended up being between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng, but that didn't mean Xie Lian gave up in drawing He Xuan into conversation. When he could be convinced to pause in his eating to say something, he proved to be a very clever conversationalist. He had a wide breadth of knowledge and an interesting, informed perspective to offer; his comments could be scathing, but they were delivered with enough wit that Xie Lian found himself delighted at the occasional, unexpected comments. It was like adding a pinch of spice to the conversation without overpowering it.

Really, things were going quite well, Xie Lian felt, until He Xuan reached for a new snack he hadn't tried yet. This was one of the ones that Xie Lian had prepared.

And, well, as far as spice went, perhaps Xie Lian had used a bit more than a pinch, by accident. He had gotten quite distracted by Ruoye and E-Ming and maybe hadn't quite been paying the best attention to what he had mixed together.

He Xuan scarfed almost half a dozen before the taste seemed to register. He Xuan already had the complexion of a drowned corpse but he suddenly went faintly green, before collapsing face down on the table.

"Lord Black Water!" Xie Lian cried.

"Ignore him, gege, that walking stomach has no taste," said Hua Cheng, reaching over to snatch the very same snacks that He Xuan had attempted to eat. "Mm. Perhaps less chilli oil next time, but the flavour is invigorating."

Xie Lian just sighed. How did one apologise for an apology?

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Chapter End Notes

Hua Cheng is at his fucking limit! He's been holding it together and swallowing his guilt and pushing on for a while now and this was just one thing too many! Self-loathing is boiling over! He needs a minute and also his god and maybe a hug! But at least some things have been voiced now

Chapter 7

Things evened out somewhat after that rather harrowing day of He Xuan's visit. At first things had felt slightly awkward, and Hua Cheng had held himself stiffly around Xie Lian. Not that he withheld any sort of comfort or kindness — if anything he somehow seemed all the more keen on pleasing him— but there was an awkwardness between them that hadn't existed in some time.

Well, Xie Lian wouldn't stand for that. For so long he had followed Hua Cheng's lead when it came to how they should comport themselves around one another, but he could see that this was no longer the correct way to go about it. There had been a time, back when Xie Lian had first been settling into Paradise Manor, when he might have accepted this strange new distance between them, when he would have assumed that this was Hua Cheng's way of brushing off Xie Lian's obvious, clingy affection, or a sign that his interest was waning.

After seeing Hua Cheng collapsed to his knees, half-choking on guilt over a misunderstanding that was entirely Xie Lian's fault, he had a much better sense for what was happening here.

So he clung all the tighter. He prodded Hua Cheng into choosing what they should do, or what they should cook, or what they should paint. He held onto his arm to walk even on his steadier days when he could have gone without. And he did not for a moment let Hua Cheng suggest that Xie Lian might be more comfortable sleeping on his own. He most certainly would not be more comfortable. If Hua Cheng was unhappy with the arrangement let him say so, but Xie Lian would always sleep better at Hua Cheng's side and if Hua Cheng was so keen to enable Xie Lian's selfishness then he could learn what it meant to say that to an eight hundred year old crown prince! There had been a time when Xie Lian had been an unspeakably spoiled, sheltered, selfish thing and he was sure he could find it in himself again!

Xie Lian knew that he had been right to act this way when he woke in the middle of the night, four days after the initial incident. He had been in the throes of some nightmare, though the details faded even as he startled awake. Still, whatever it had been had left him flailing and sweaty and shivering under the cool hands that pressed against him, one against his shoulder and another against his wrist.

"Gege?"

Xie Lian blinked at the butterflies above him and swallowed until he felt less nauseated.

"I'm okay."

"What do you need?"

Xie Lian's instinct was to insist he was fine, that he needed nothing, but he fought to swallow that impulse alongside the nausea. Hua Cheng was feeling guilty and distant and strange, and

Xie Lian knew he seemed to like a task or a way to please. And Xie Lian liked having an excuse to be touched. He could try to be selfish about this, for both of them.

"A damp cloth," he finally said.

"Of course," Hua Cheng agreed immediately, and was quickly out of bed and crossing to the bathing chamber.

In no time at all, Xie Lian was sitting up and already feeling much better, and Hua Cheng had returned with a wet, cotton cloth. Xie Lian made no move to take it, and instead just shifted closer to the edge of the bed, leaning towards Hua Cheng. For a brief moment Hua Cheng's hand hesitated, before he ran the cool, damp cloth down Xie Lian's brow, cheeks, neck.

This had been intended as something to comfort Hua Cheng, but Xie Lian couldn't deny how wonderful it felt. Being a little less hot and a little less sticky was making him feel immediately better. He sighed happily, and loosened the neck of his sleeping robes just a little.

"I can do this, if it's too—" Xie Lian said, because he had at least enough shame to know he was really going a bit far, but Hua Cheng, now in a rhythm, did not stop in his work for a moment. The cloth was trailed down his neck, letting water collect in the dip of his collarbone, and was then run across the triangle of exposed chest.

Really, it was too much! If it continued Xie Lian wasn't entirely sure *what* he would do, and yet he never wanted it to stop!

He wasn't able to go too far down this particular line of growing worry when Hua Cheng's hand paused, the cloth catching against the thin silver chain that hung beneath his robes.

Hua Cheng fingered the chain just enough to reveal the ring on its end.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm wearing it to bed," said Xie Lian. In truth, he hadn't taken it off once since being given it. He felt unaccountably and fiercely protective of it. It had been a gift, so earnestly given, from San Lang and nothing would compel him to part with it now that he had it.

"No, gege," Hua Cheng whispered, though his fingers lingered a moment longer on it before he carefully tucked it back down between the folds of Xie Lian's sleeping robe.

"I'm feeling much better now, thank you, San Lang. Shall we go back to sleep?"

"Yes, gege."

Things improved between them once more after that, settling back into their comfortable, familiar rhythms.

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Xie Lian was spending his afternoon with Yin Yu.

That morning, while they had been hunting through Hua Cheng's pell-mell collection of a library for a very specific book of poetry that Xie Lian had been reminiscing on and which Hua Cheng was positive he had seen before, Yin Yu had sought them out. Sometimes Xie Lian felt that Yin Yu treated the two of them together as a traveller might a tiger: something you should respect but from which you also, promptly, back away. Which Xie Lian couldn't really account for, because Yin Yu seemed to interact easily enough with Hua Cheng, who had been his employer for at least a century or two, and when Xie Lian was on his own he'd had some very pleasant conversations with Yin Yu. But when Yin Yu sought them out while together, he occasionally looked a little hunted.

This time had proven to be at least somewhat justified, because when he had brought up that there was a problem in the city that may need Hua Cheng's attention, the Ghost King had shot his assistant a scathing look.

"What do I pay you for?" he had demanded, glancing down at the notes Yin Yu had rather nervously passed him. "A brothel and a fishmonger? You need me to deal with trite like this? Useless."

"Uh, the entire situation has escalated a bit, Chengzhu. See, originally the brothel ladies were accusing the fishmongers of selling rotten fish — or possibly being rotten fish, that point isn't entirely clear — and causing a stink, and the fishmongers were saying that, ah, to put it delicately, that it was the brothel causing the, um, smell. But as it turns out that there was a yaoguai that had burrowed beneath the street which was causing the smell and all the feuding has woken it up and—"

"Sounds like a problem," Xie Lian had said, when Hua Cheng hadn't seemed terribly moved to pity his assistant. "I can help you with it, if you like? It'd probably be best to get it sorted out quickly, right? If it's undermining the street?"

Rather than looking pleased at the offer of help, Yin Yu's general air of being hunted had increased. His gaze had snapped up to Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian had glanced behind him, but Hua Cheng had just smiled back at him.

"Gege needn't trouble himself. It sounds unpleasant, this one will go deal with it and come back quickly."

"Are you sure?" Xie Lian had asked. "I can help!"

"You've already been forced to host Black Water, you can only be expected to handle so many rotten fish in a season."

"Well, then perhaps I can help Yin Yu solve the bureaucratic side of things while San Lang deals with the yaoguai," Xie Lian had suggested, to which Hua Cheng had agreed readily enough.

Which was how he had come to be in one of the various studies that sprouted up around the manor like mushrooms. Xie Lian had a sneaky suspicion that when one started to fill up with reports and documents, Hua Cheng just built another rather than deal with it. Yin Yu had

abandoned his mask on top of one of the cluttered desks, and going by the expression he currently wore he likely shared this sentiment.

"Given how big that yaoguai had looked, it must be old," Yin Yu was explaining when Xie Lian had asked what they were looking for. "It's probably been burrowing down there since before I got here, it probably arrived during one of the times that Chengzhu was away from the city."

"Did he often leave the city before you came to help in his absence?" Xie Lian asked as he rifled through documents. Some were written in a very neat, crisp hand. Others were in Hua Cheng's entirely unmistakable hand.

Yin Yu glanced at him. "Yes, Dianxia, frequently. I believe that's one of the reasons he decided to take me on, so that someone would be around to keep track of things while he was away. …I'm under the impression that the city used to burn itself to the ground much more often in those days."

"Huh! I'm surprised that San Lang hasn't gone travelling at all since I've met him then. It's been quite a while, hasn't it?"

"It has been, but he only ever travelled for… business purposes, I believe. That business has been resolved, so I'm not sure he has any reason to travel these days."

Xie Lian was burning with curiosity about what sort of business could span centuries and then suddenly just be completed entirely, but he let himself be distracted by the stack of worn, yellowing scrolls that Yin Yu placed in front of him.

"Since that yaoguai has probably been here since before my time, it means all the records we have to go through will be Chengzhu's…"

Yin Yu said this like it was the worst possible fate, and it made Xie Lian laugh. When he assured Yin Yu he had gotten quite used to Hua Cheng's writing and didn't find it overly difficult to read anymore, the banished god looked like he might start crying from relief. So between them they scoured for references of that specific street and its occupants and anything that might hint at the yaoguai's arrival, the businesses that had occupied the space before and since, and whether there were any pre-existing claims on that subterranean level of the city. Because apparently all of that was relevant to ensure things were able to go back to whatever passed as normal around Ghost City.

"Dianxia, if you ever ascend again you could put in to be a civil god," Yin Yu said reverently as Xie Lian passed over a promising looking document. "I would pray to you."

Xie Lian laughed awkwardly. "No one's prayed to me in eight hundred years, there's no point changing that now! And really, if you keep calling me Dianxia then I'll have to learn what your title in Heaven was so I can at least return the favour, and I really haven't kept up with the affairs of the Upper Court… isn't it just easier for both of us to be casual with one another?"

At the mention of learning about his time as a god, Yin Yu stiffened. Without his mask to hide his face, his expression was distinctly uncomfortable. Xie Lian could understand that, his own time as a god wasn't something he liked to think too much about either, but he didn't regret pushing when Yin Yu finally acquiesced.

"If that's what you wish… Xie Lian."

Xie Lian smiled, and it felt like a success. He may not be good friends with Yin Yu, not like he was with Hua Cheng, but he felt like he could be. How much things had changed in, relatively speaking, not that much time at all. When he had first arrived in Ghost City, the very thought of being touched by another person, of being spoken to, of being seen at all, had been overwhelming and painful and panic-inducing. Eventually he had warmed up to Hua Cheng, his dear, patient San Lang, but even then the suggestion that other unseen servants may have been stalking the halls of Paradise Manor had left him feeling ill and shaky. Now Yin Yu's voice was a welcome interruption throughout his day, and he was looking forward to the next time he might meet He Xuan, assuming he could ever convince the Calamity to come back after that last tea.

His world had shrunk to the size of a hut. No, less than that. His world had been a slim strip of filthy floor and not much beyond that. The thought of it growing bigger than that had been terrifying, and so Hua Cheng had helped him keep his world small and snug and safe. Little by little though it was growing, and Xie Lian was surprised by how light and free he felt, simply sitting here with a man who had nearly sent him into hysterics not that many months ago, and thinking about a city he had never even seen.

"It seems like a lot of work to manage a city like this — a lot to consider," Xie Lian remarked. "And apparently the consequences of not doing so are rather serious, if Ghost City has been regularly burnt down… How did such a place even come to be?"

"The ghosts in Ghost City come from all over and just settle here, by this point it's a fairly well-known destination. Chengzhu made it into a sort of… haven. Not that he'd describe it like that, he mostly acts like they're a bunch of parasites who decided to sprout up around his manor, but it would have taken massive amounts of energy to harness this place between yin and yang and to stabilise the initial space for the city. Whatever his reasons, he must have had some sort of intention when he established this place. He created a place for wandering ghosts to congregate if nothing else, and they certainly have done that. They have more protection here than they would most other places, so long as they respect Hua Chengzhu's laws, so I suppose it seems like an obvious choice to many."

"That says a lot about San Lang."

Yin Yu shrugged. "What exactly it says I don't know, but you're right that it says something. But now that it's here, it requires management and that is a job unto itself."

"A city for ghosts does seem like it would lend itself to being chaotic." He could perfectly remember the chaos and heartache that had come from even new refugees arriving in the Xianle capital and they at least had been regular humans.

"It is. It doesn't help that every ghost comes from somewhere different, so on top of learning how to manage basic ghost customs, you have to be prepared for contradictory mortal customs from across regions and time to all butt up against each other as well. It's a mess."

"Ghosts have their own customs?" Xie Lian asked, intrigued. He had never considered that they would differ from mortals on such a level.

Yin Yu rubbed his forehead as if fighting back a headache. "You can't even imagine. And in most circumstances, you probably wouldn't want to. It's… a learning curve."

"Tell me about some?" Xie Lian asked, as he began unwound the next scroll on the stack. "Now that I'm living here, I'd like to know more."

So Yin Yu did. He was a wealth of knowledge about the ghosts of Ghost City, and clearly worked diligently in helping Hua Cheng maintain it. That meant he had an almost endless supply of unbelievable stories to share with Xie Lian; Xie Lian at times had to entirely put down the scrolls he was trying to decipher in order to laugh at the outlandishness of what Yin Yu was describing.

"Well, at least I know to be wary of the food," Xie Lian said.

"I wish Hua Chengzhu had thought to warn me during my first few days," Yin Yu sighed. "I think it amused him not to… though nothing truly bad came of it. I can't say I care much for tanghulu anymore though. Is there anything else in particular that Your H— that you're curious about?"

Xie Lian considered this. There had been something on his mind lately…

"I've been wondering about what ghosts do with their ashes, but it seems like a delicate subject to bring up to a ghost," he confessed. "I mean, a ghost can only be destroyed if their ashes are scattered, right? There must be customs then, when it comes to how one handles them."

Yin Yu nodded. "In truth, I find it depends on the ghost. Most just keep their ashes on them… I think most feel safest to know where exactly they are. But some are more sentimental or sneakier about their methods. Some find places that were important to them in life and keep them there, or some will choose completely unrelated spots to try to hide them, thinking it will stop anyone else from ever finding them. Of course that creates new problems: it might stop you from being dispersed because of a petty brawl, but are you really any safer if you bury your ashes in the ground where they're just as likely to be dispersed by a boar rooting for tubers?"

"I see what you mean…" said Xie Lian, who himself understood exactly how unreliable a secret buried in the ground could be. After all, he had been left in a thrice-sealed coffin and even that had degraded and freed its contents eventually. Nothing lasted forever. "I remember San Lang mentioning that he used his ashes as a stake in a match against thirty-three gods — is that a common practice?"

"Neither common nor uncommon," Yin Yu said with a shrug. "Ashes let you do more than disperse a ghost, you really have full control of them if you hold their ashes. You always get a few willing to make that bet in the Gambler's Den but most aren't that careless. Chengzhu is… a force not many would dare presume they could emulate. Though there are other customs related to ashes… like if a ghost is in love."

"Oh?" said Xie Lian, intrigued. He glanced over at Yin Yu, in time to catch him scrutinising Xie Lian from the corner of his eye before quickly returning to his work. Curious. He didn't think that Xie Lian was about to debate whether or not a ghost could love, did he?

Yin Yu continued to speak, face buried in a box of documents. "If a ghost really cares for someone, it's said that they might entrust their ashes to them."

"I had no idea ghosts had such romantic practices!"

"Well, in theory. It's more the sort of thing for stories than reality — I doubt most would ever dare do it. Imagine trusting someone so completely that you put your life in their hands…"

"It seems set up for manipulation or betrayal," agreed Xie Lian.

Yin Yu nodded and they lapsed into silence for a while as they continued to work through the documents, though Xie Lian found he couldn't shake the thoughts of a ghost daring to give away something so fragile or precious… more than that, he couldn't shake the thought of anyone, living or dead, trusting and loving someone so completely that they could do such a thing. Xie Lian wondered if there had ever been anyone in his life that he could have trusted so completely as to do that. And what would have happened to him in the past if he had. The faith you would have to have in another person would be staggering.

It was a lot to think about.

Eventually Hua Cheng returned from his errand without a hair out of place, and dragging a severed, horned snake head the size of an ox.

This Hua Cheng dropped at Yin Yu's feet and told him to skin it and hang the skull somewhere along the main thoroughfare with a written warning that if anyone or anything had grand views of burrowing beneath his city that it had better get the proper zoning permits from the Waning Moon Officer or else be prepared to experience a very forceful eviction.

Given the spectacle that Hua Cheng had almost certainly been walking down the streets, dragging a beheaded, bleeding snake yao corpse, Xie Lian suspected a written message would be largely unnecessary.

"What does gege want to do now that that chore is dealt with?" Hua Cheng asked, sprawling himself across the table that Xie Lian had been using.

"Whatever San Lang is in the mood for," Xie Lian said, perfectly content.

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He Xuan had found himself in Ghost City — and specifically in Paradise Manor — more in the last few months than he sometimes visited in years, depending on how busy both he and Hua Cheng were and how intolerable his fellow Ghost King was being at the moment. It should be incredibly fucking annoying, except it was ever so slightly harder to be annoyed when it wasn't Crimson Rain summoning him at a whim but instead a cheerful invitation from Xie Lian.

When he had agreed to help Hua Cheng hunt for his dead god, he really hadn't expected to *find* anything. He had thought it would be a slightly annoying way to pay off his debt, and it wasn't like he didn't already have clones listening for all sorts of rumours up in the various palaces anyway so why not feed some to Crimson Rain from time to time? He really hadn't expected his complacency in this to somehow amount to a standing invitation to *socialise* .

He got more than enough of that from fucking Shi Qingxuan.

But it was a reasonably smart move to stay on the good side of Hua Cheng's god, because it meant staying on Hua Cheng's good side. Really, in any other situation He Xuan might be disturbed by just how easily and obviously Hua Cheng let himself be manipulated but since it was to He Xuan's benefit he supposed he couldn't argue. Hua Cheng was perpetually ready to be moved by the whims of his god, and since Xie Lian seemed to be a generally pleasant, mild-natured person this was a notable improvement.

If a slightly nauseating one.

Going from the very "informative" meeting that had been held after that first run-in, along with a single comment leveraged from Yin Yu, and his own miserable eyes, He Xuan had concluded that there really was no deeper relationship between the two. This was simply a disciple and his (unwitting) god. Or, perhaps, a friendship. Or something. Xie Lian seemed oblivious to Hua Cheng's very obvious, blazing-like-the-molten-heart-of-Mt-Tonglu level of worship. Both of them seemed oblivious to the fact that they seemed to be entirely smitten with each other. And yet they were so obnoxiously clingy.

Xie Lian seemed to be constantly draped over Crimson Rain, and Crimson Rain seemed to be totally happy to be used as a living pillow. Or, well, a dead one but that was beside the point. When they were sitting, there was a good chance that Xie Lian would at least have his shoulder pressed to Hua Cheng's, if not entirely draped across his side. If they were standing or walking, then Xie Lian was looped completely around him, like some maiden being led around by a beau or an attendant.

At the very least Xie Lian wasn't as pushy as Shi Qingxuan, and didn't seem to mind He Xuan's silences. He was a better conversationalist than most of the Upper Court so that was a point in his favour, and it made these little get-togethers not completely intolerable. And Hua Cheng was at least good for keeping a table full of snacks to go along with a tea, though He Xuan had learnt to be very cautious about what he put in his mouth. He could consume the cruelest of demons to enhance his own powers but he could not, apparently, stomach wherever abominations Xie Lian concocted when left to his own devices.

The first time that had happened, He Xuan had really thought he had been about to die again. He had thought this had to be Crimson Rain's simmering revenge for daring to upset his god.

Because any pain like that had to be *intentional* .

Well, it had been intentional only insomuch as Xie Lian had, apparently, put serious effort into preparing the food.

Hua Cheng, of course, had eaten liberally from the plate of poison and had just sneered at He Xuan when he had come to and succeeded in hastily excusing himself.

Now he knew to pay close attention to whatever dishes Hua Cheng ate the most from and to avoid those entirely. Whatever was wrong with Hua Cheng, it would appear to be a trait he shared with his god.

"You really have pet dragons made of bone?" Xie Lian asked during one such visit. He Xuan hadn't even fought this meet-up, because it at least gave him an excuse to get out of Heaven just before one of Shi Wudu's festivals which was bound to be intolerable.

"They're not pets."

"They are, he pays me to feed them when he's… busy," said Hua Cheng, because there was apparently no solidarity at all between Ghost Kings.

"They sound amazing! What a fascinating spiritual creature. Are they as cute as San Lang's butterflies?"

He Xuan didn't know how to answer that. Were they as cute as Crimson Rain's feared, murderous hoard of razor-sharp spiritual monsters? "They're not cute."

"Perhaps gege should go see them for himself."

"Don't go inviting people to another ghost's domain!" He Xuan snapped.

"Don't worry, don't worry, I wouldn't impose," Xie Lian reassured him.

Before the conversation could move on from that though, there was a knock at the door and Yin Yu was bowing his way in.

"Chengzhu. There is a problem you may wish to address at the city gates."

Hua Cheng huffed. "This again? If this continues, I'm reviewing your pay. Whatever it is, deal with it. I'm busy."

"San Lang," Xie Lian said, tone scolding and affectionate and so baffling to hear directed to Crimson Rain Sought Flower of all fucking people. He Xuan was never going to get used to whatever the fuck was going on between them. At this point it would honestly make more sense if they'd just have sex. And would probably be less grossly intimate than whatever He Xuan was forced to witness in their company.

"But gege," Hua Cheng whined — genuinely whined. He Xuan stuffed more food into his mouth to avoid audibly gagging.

"Chengzhu, I believe this is a matter that may need your personal attention."

And then there was a lull, that He Xuan was certain meant that information was just exchanged through a private array. Sure enough, Hua Cheng's eyes narrowed and he stood.

"Trouble?" Xie Lian asked.

"Nothing gege should worry about. Just a pair of unruly servants messing around in my city that need to be reminded of their place."

"Should I come along?"

"It's beneath gege's dignity, it would just be dull. Visit Black Water's island instead and see his fish. It's ugly but would still be more interesting than this chore."

He Xuan was prepared to snap, once again, that his island was not Hua Cheng's to offer to other people and he was no tour guide, when he felt the other ghost slide into his private array.

Take him to your miserable island and I'll remove all your pet fees since the New Year.

He Xuan narrowed his eyes. He had grown much too cynical and suspicious to accept that off the cuff. *Why are you trying to get rid of him all of a sudden? What's actually trying to invade Ghost City?*

Hua Cheng sneered. *"Invade"? Nothing. But Number Thirty-Four and Thirty-Five have apparently mistaken idiocy for bravery and have come to pay a visit. No need for Dianxia to be near filth like that.*

This was about as close as Hua Cheng would ever come to actually asking for something. In fact, from someone like him, this was almost a heartfelt plea. He really didn't seem to want any chance of Xie Lian crossing paths with the Southern Generals, it would appear. He Xuan didn't pretend to know much about what was going on with that — since meeting Xie Lian, he had taken the time to research more about the fall of Xianle and the fate of the Flower-Crowned Martial God. He knew there had been a falling out between him and his attendants who would eventually go on to become the Cardinal Gods of the South. He also knew that *something* had been done to Xie Lian just before Hua Cheng was reunited with his god, he had heard enough strange rumours around the city about Hua Cheng's mysterious "prize". He didn't know the details, only that it was bad.

Something about the two events seemed to be creating a maelstrom in Hua Cheng's brain, some need to protect that was bizarre to see in a person like Hua Cheng, and so He Xuan was getting a god foisted off on him.

Well, it wasn't like he didn't have experience with that. At least this time he was being paid for it.

"Fine. We're taking your array."

Xie Lian cast Hua Cheng another glance — he wasn't an idiot, he obviously knew he was being sent away and that things were being said over his head — but didn't argue, instead choosing to stand and effuse as if this were a perfectly normal invitation. Hua Cheng just nodded, smiled at Xie Lian and assured him he would just be gone for a short while, that it really was no trouble, and then tossed his dice idly.

When He Xuan opened the nearest door, it opened into Nether Water Manor. With a gesture for Xie Lian to follow, he swept off back into his own domain.

There was a relief in being back here, even if he was being followed here by a god. (And that was something he really couldn't think too deeply about. The idea of inviting a god to his manor, considering some of the damning secrets he had hidden here, was horrific, even if this was a banished god that had apparently aligned himself with a Ghost King rather than the Heavens.) He really didn't get to spend as much time here as he would like, and there was something comforting about the cool, damp darkness of his island. He could breathe a little easier here.

"Oh," said Xie Lian as he came through, stopping immediately to throw one hand against the door frame and the other against his temple. "That's disorienting!"

He Xuan cast him a rather exasperated look. "Have you never used a distance-shortening array?"

"Not in a while…"

Really, he couldn't make heads or tails of this god. Crimsons Rain spoke like he had painted the sky blue and he had disarmed He Xuan so effortlessly as to be embarrassing, but in moments like this he seemed more pathetic than anything else. It was almost enough to make a person pity him, if He Xuan were a person and not a resentful Calamity. Whoever heard of someone getting woozy from a distance-shortening array?

"Well?" he pressed, feeling a little sullen now that Hua Cheng was gone and he was alone with Xie Lian. "If we don't go soon, Crimson Rain will be finished with his mess before we even get to the beach."

And he didn't want Xie Lian, banished or not, lingering around his manor.

"Of course, you're right," Xie Lian agreed. "...About the chore San Lang is taking care of, it's not actually dangerous, is it?"

He Xuan glanced at Xie Lian, half expecting this to be a joke, but he seemed sincere. A god who was actually worried about the well being of not just a ghost, but a Devastation-ranked Calamity like Crimson Rain. How in the world had Hua Cheng found a person like this?

"Not for him. Probably for the idiots he's dealing with."

Xie Lian nodded, reassured, and gestured for He Xuan to lead the way. As He Xuan turned to do so, he noticed Xie Lian press his hand briefly between the folds of his robes, as if feeling for something hidden there. But he had no interest in prying into whatever secrets a banished

god may or may not be keeping, he had enough actual gods to manage right now, so he led them through Nether Water Manor, up through the lake, and into the forest beyond.

The further they travelled, the more He Xuan found himself channelling every scrap of patience he had been forced to cultivate in the Upper Court while he stopped and waited for Xie Lian to stumble his way against a tree yet again.

He knew, of course, that Xie Lian was considered a laughingstock among the Heavenly Courts, and had been broadly considered a god of misfortune during his decline, but there was unlucky and then there was whatever this was. The tree roots weren't actually jumping up to attack him, so why couldn't he keep his feet under him? Wasn't he supposed to have been a martial god? Had he not thrown He Xuan through a door just because he had felt a presence approaching him from behind?

There was something off about Xie Lian. It had been most obvious during that first meeting, when he had looked so sickly, but most of their subsequent meetings had taken place while seated at a table. He had always seemed bright eyed and alert and flush with health then, no sign of sickness on him. He Xuan had written it off as a temporary thing — perhaps he had truly been stricken by fear at feeling He Xuan at his back, or maybe banished gods could take sick and he'd been under the weather.

But the way he had leaned against the walls while walking through Nether Water Manor, and the way he currently seemed one wrong step away from falling now that he was on uneven ground suggested otherwise.

"What's wrong with you?" he finally demanded when he was forced to grab Xie Lian's elbow to keep him from stumbling again. Because if Hua Cheng's precious god managed to break his nose falling to the ground, He Xuan would certainly hear about it. Also Xie Lian was the only tolerable person in Paradise Manor so as long as He Xuan was going to be obliged to continue his meetings with Hua Cheng, he was in favour of Xie Lian being in one piece.

Rather than being offended by the brusque tone, Xie Lian swayed towards him instead of towards a tree, his free hand coming to close around He Xuan's icy hand, for all the world like He Xuan had politely offered him support rather than grabbed him out of nowhere.

"Sorry, sorry, I know I'm slow. I suffered an injury a while ago, and my balance hasn't recovered yet."

That… actually explained some things. Perhaps there was a practical reason for him to be attached to Hua Cheng's side like a barnacle rather than Hua Cheng's completely shameless obsession. Besides for the obvious state he had been during that first meeting, he could at least remember when they had been more formally introduced, the way Xie Lian had swayed as he'd bowed, with Hua Cheng reaching up to hold him in a way that had read as grabby and needy to He Xuan at the time but may have been a genuine effort to keep this god on his feet.

This did not say anything particularly flattering about He Xuan and how he had let a person in such a state throw him around like a ragdoll. He resolved all the more firmly to stay on this particular immortal's good side. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what Xie Lian was capable of when he wasn't so badly injured as to barely be able to walk.

So now he was not just a tour guide, but a walking stick. He continued to sink lower and lower. But letting Xie Lian cling to him really did improve their pace so he paused long enough to let Xie Lian readjust his grip; they were now arm in arm. If Shi Qingxuan could see them he would look like he had been given an entire cup of vinegar, for how much he liked to cling and how often he was rebuked.

If Hua Cheng could see them he would spit fire. Or blood. That almost made it worthwhile.

"What sort of injury still impacts a god after months?" He Xuan demanded as they walked, not bothering with tact. Because any singular injury that could cause all this must have been a devastating one. Though, if it wasn't one single injury, but something on going… that brought up another option which was significantly more concerning. It should feel completely impossible, but Crimson Rain was a Calamity and He Xuan knew as well as anyone how resentment and suffering and obsession twisted a person over time… "Unless it's Hua Cheng who's—"

"No!"

Xie Lian's denial was so absolute that he actually stopped walking and nearly tripped since he was still holding onto He Xuan who hadn't. He staggered to catch up while He Xuan raised a brow at him.

"I mean, it wasn't Hua Cheng who— who hurt me. He's been helping me recover this whole time."

"Then what?" He Xuan demanded because he was curious and also a fucking Ghost King so who said he had to be kind about it? Maybe in another life Scholar He would have been gentle about seeking out these sorts of answers, but Black Water Sinks Ships just wanted to know what could so effectively neuter a god, and whether it could work against a full-status god.

Xie Lian said nothing at first until finally, in a small voice, said, "I came across a mortal and one thing led to another… he incapacitated me. He kept me like that for a while before San Lang rescued me. I was much worse than this initially."

Worse than someone who could hardly walk the straight halls of a manor and was completely thwarted by a forest path? He Xuan snorted. There couldn't have been much left of him for Crimson Rain to scrape up. No wonder Hua Cheng had been such a reclusive grouch in those first few weeks.

"What was the point of the mortal keeping you then? You can hardly walk now, what use could you have possibly had?"

Xie Lian was silent. Perhaps He Xuan had succeeded in offending. Except then he realised that he wasn't, actually, silent. Barely audible over the sounds of the forest and approaching ocean, He Xuan could just barely hear how Xie Lian's breathing had hitched. His fingers had tightened compulsively against He Xuan's sleeve.

"He found uses," was all he was eventually told.

It should have meant nothing. It was a completely empty three words. Really, Xie Lian had succeeded in telling He Xuan absolutely nothing about his circumstances, and the only thing he knew now that he hadn't known before was that he had received an injury and been kept by a human.

(He Xuan had known others who had been taken and kept. He knew the uses that had been found for them. He knew one had been beaten to the death and the other had ended the torment herself.)

He was projecting. He was a ghost, his very essence was made of resentment as thick as the brackish sludge at the bottom of an estuary, and this was simply stirring it to the surface. Xie Lian was not only an ex-martial god but a man.

(And yet he felt a coil of anger in the empty hollow of his starved guts. He didn't have the passion of Crimson Rain, his resentment was for things long dead and against people who deserved to join them. It was thick and slow and choking, and it rarely got whipped into a frenzy, so it was startling how hot it felt in that moment.)

He didn't know much about Xie Lian, except that he was a banished god that Hua Cheng had hounded after for centuries. In the few meetings they'd had since however he had come across as reasonably clever, kind, and compassionate which was an odd thing to find in a place like Paradise Manor.

(His fiancée had been all of those things once, before someone had found "uses" for her and they had been beaten from her in rivulets of blood. He hadn't been able to rescue her, neither her nor his sister. He would claw the gods out of Heaven for that.)

Hua Cheng had rescued his god, and suddenly the way he had looked ready to tear He Xuan's throat out with his teeth as soon as they had been behind closed doors made a lot more sense to him.

He was projecting.

But if he wasn't, that hungry, angry core that kept him tethered to the mortal realms was gnashing and clawing at the hollow of his belly and he didn't know what to do with that.

"We'll be there soon," he said instead, because this wasn't a hunger he was willing to share with anyone else. "If you want to see the bone fish, go to the shore. But don't wade far if you're this unsteady. If you fall, you won't be able to swim in these waters and I don't want to have to deal with Crimson Rain if I have to fish you out of the drink."

"Alright," said Xie Lian who seemed just as relieved as He Xuan for the change in subject. "I'm excited to meet them! San Lang says he feeds them when you're away… is there something in particular that you do that keeps you away?"

"Work," was all He Xuan said, because he was still angry at Hua Cheng choosing to take his vengeance by dropping that hint to Xie Lian. Banished or not, he didn't need centuries' of work to be undermined by one nosy god and a petty business partner.

"It must be hard to be away from home for so long at a time," Xie Lian offered, and He Xuan just grunted in acknowledgement.

It didn't take that much longer before they finally reached one of the rocky beaches that bordered Black Water Island, looking out on the iron-dark sea that made up the majority of his domain. Waves crested, as white and dangerous as fangs, and He Xuan could make out the way the water moved against the current that signalled that his bone dragons were lurking in the deeper water. Compared to the gardens of Paradise Manor, this was a grey, barren, dead sort of space,, but it was exactly what Xie Lian had asked for.

And to his credit, he did seem enchanted by it. The tension that had been building and building since He Xuan had decided to pry into Xie Lian's affairs drained as he surveyed the scene. He stood a little straighter and smiled at what he saw, as if it wasn't a dreary strip of beach bracketed on either side by a black forest and a black sea. Leaning against a fallen log, Xie Lian removed his boots for wading. He didn't have to walk far before he gasped in surprised delight; the smaller bone fish that could swim in shallow water were coming to investigate this strange new creature that their master had brought to the island.

Leaning down, Xie Lian let the bone fish swim around his hands and nip at his fingers. He Xuan studiously ignored the way the larger bone dragons were moping deep in the ocean about not being able to get close enough to play. They were sinister, demonic guards that ate entire ships. They did not play and certainly did not mope.

Or that was what He Xuan would *like* to believe. He would like to believe his own spiritual creatures would give him a little face and pretend to be the terrors they were meant to be. What they did instead was finally decide they had been left out long enough and collapse in on themselves with a sound like someone had knocked over boulder-sized mahjong tiles. Soon they were zipping through the water more like eels than dragons, scattering the fish in their overzealous desire to get some attention.

Rather than being annoyed, He Xuan just gave in. It was pointless to fight against and he hated expending effort into pointless things. Xie Lian, he was learning, was a force of nature. Not a good one or a bad one, per se, but a force nonetheless. Like a monsoon. He had made friends with Hua Cheng's demonic butterflies after all, and stroked the cursed sabre like a puppy, so why shouldn't he frolic around with Black Water Sink Ships' bone dragons?

And sure enough, Xie Lian was just as excited by the bone dragons as he had been by the fish, and appeared to have thrown caution to the wind in his desire to bend over and play with them. If it weren't for His Highness's spiritual weapon zipping out to try to keep its master balance, He Xuan might have actually started to worry.

He gave the bone dragons very strict orders to make sure the idiot stayed on his feet. Hua Cheng would be intolerable if he drowned.

He may as well do something productive while they were wasting time. He left the rocky little beach and scouted along the treeline until he found a branch that looked long and straight enough to serve his purpose. He tore it off the tree with a snap like a firecracker.

Xie Lian glanced back curiously, sharply enough to apparently throw himself off balance because He Xuan saw the exact moment his expression went vague and his knees wobbled with the threat of a faint. He also saw the moment one of his bone dragons rapidly expanded in size — essentially beaching itself, but shoving its head under Xie Lian so rather than collapsing into the water it collapsed against its snout. Xie Lian lay slumped against it, stroking its and murmuring praise while he waited for whatever sort it fit it was that overtook him to pass.

He Xuan made an effort to ignore it, instead marching back to the beach and launching the branch like a javelin into the ocean with very specific instructions. One of the unencumbered bone dragons leapt from the waves and snatched it out of the air.

Rather than doing their job quickly and efficiently as befitted a spiritual creature of their calibre, the dragons wrestled over it like dogs with a bone, and the smaller fish wove in and out, tangling themselves in the loose bark. Xie Lian watched this with amusement from his perch against the larger dragon. Once he seemed sturdy on his feet, he would occasionally join in, trying to wrestle the branch free — a contest he won more often than not, which was unsettling in and of itself. He would always toss it again though, causing a tidal wave of bones to race each other to retrieve it. This kept them all busy enough that He Xuan could lie out on the rocks, close his eyes, and enjoy being somewhere relatively quiet and calm for once. Who would expect that one of these useless meetings with Hua Cheng would actually prove to be such a welcome reprieve of the usual chaos of Heaven?

He almost regretted it when Hua Cheng contacted him to say that the problem had been dealt with, and that he should return to Paradise Manor. It was briefly tempting to refuse him, just to see what he would do if He Xuan insinuated that he might want to keep Xie Lian to himself for a few days, but quickly discarded that idea. He didn't actually like rebuilding his manor all the time, unlike some people.

Xie Lian also seemed eager to return when He Xuan passed on this information. He waded out of the water, bidding farewell to the fish, while He Xuan retrieved the branch from his dragons. Well, it wasn't exactly elegant and it was covered with toothmarks, but it would serve.

"Take this."

For a moment, Xie Lian seemed not to know what to do with the wet stick that had just been thrust at him, but then he turned it and understanding dawned. The bone fish had done a serviceable job of stripping away the bark, twigs, and imperfections, leaving a walking stick that was worn as smooth as driftwood.

"Thank you," Xie Lian said as he tested his weight against it.

"Don't thank me. You're slow. Frankly it's ridiculous that you didn't think of this sooner, wouldn't this fix a lot of your problems?"

Xie Lian smiled a bit at this, as if He Xuan had meant it as a joke, before his expression slipped a little. "Yes… I suppose it is a little ridiculous, isn't it? I could have done this at any time, it wouldn't have been hard…"

He Xuan eyed Xie Lian, but ultimately had no interest in figuring out what had him suddenly looking so thoughtfully at some stupid stick. Instead he stuck out a hand so that between that and the stick, the walk through the forest was actually quite steady and uneventful. He even let himself get drawn into conversation as they walked back because, well, Xie Lian was ultimately clever and kind and compassionate.

There were worse people to talk to than him.

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"Gege didn't fetch me after his nap, and left me all alone with Yin Yu," came Hua Cheng's voice, so sullen that Xie Lian couldn't help but chuckle at his melodramatics.

"San Lang was busy," said Xie Lian, as he paused to swipe rain water away from his face.

It wasn't bothering his eyes at all, since he had Ruoye snuggly wrapped around them once more, but by now his hair and clothes were drenched. It had been raining since early morning and had shown no signs of letting up. If he was more sensible he probably would have saved a visit to the armoury courtyard for another day but he had woken up from his nap that day with a burning conviction deep in his chest. It was time. He had spent the past week in preparation, working on theory but hesitant to actually attempt a practical application. The nap had left him feeling rejuvenated and more daring than he had been in a while, and he had known that if he didn't chase it in that moment he would inevitably lose his nerve. Besides, the rain had been rather refreshing at first, when he had felt like he was burning so hot with some potent mixture of determination and shame.

That being the primary reason he hadn't sought Hua Cheng out. He could have, easily. Hua Cheng would have enjoyed coming along, and normally it was Xie Lian's habit to find him promptly after waking up, but this time… he needed the first little bit of this to be just for himself. He needed to try it, to feel it, to decide if he dared continue down this path.

He had, of course, known that Hua Cheng would find him sooner rather than later and didn't mind that in the slightest. He was happy he was here, even. Because he had taken his first steps alone and now he knew: he could do this.

Honestly, it felt a little silly that it had taken this long.

"You'll catch a cold like this," Hua Cheng tutted.

Xie Lian could hear the familiar jangle of his boots as they splashed through the wet, now muddy courtyard. Then there was suddenly a change in sound; the rain, rather than pattering against the ground, was now drumming loudly above his head. Confused, Xie Lian pulled back Ruoye, who eagerly took this as an excuse to dive back under Xie Lian's robes and out of the rain (Xie Lian jerked at the feeling of sodden silk suddenly plastering itself to his ribs). Above his head, keeping the rain at bay, was a bright red umbrella.

"Why is gege out in the rain?" Hua Cheng asked. "Without a hat or even a coat?"

Neither question had a good answer, admittedly. He had no hat because he couldn't quite bear to replace the one he had once owned, and no coat because he simply hadn't had one in so long that the thought to look for one hadn't even crossed his mind — though he now had no doubt that one must exist for him. Several, probably, knowing Hua Cheng, of oiled linen or woven papal leaves or something else that would have kept him warm and dry. It had not even occurred to him. As for the former question, it was altogether a harder one to answer. Why was he in the rain right now? Because he had felt the urge to practise martial forms and hadn't wanted to wait. The more complicated answer though wanted to stick to his tongue like glutinous rice; it caught in his throat at the idea of admitting to it.

Which was one of the reasons he had known he had to come out here alone, to start with.

It was a secret he had held close to his chest for a long time now. The fact that he was out here at all, practising in the open with the full knowledge that Hua Cheng would eventually seek him out and ask this very question meant something.

It meant, perhaps, he shouldn't just swallow it down and choke on it again. He and Hua Cheng had proven to be very capable of misunderstanding each other after all, if things weren't said plainly.

"There was just something I wanted to try," Xie Lian said, holding up the walking stick in demonstration.

Hua Cheng gave him a questioning look, which was reasonable since there was a much more impressive selection of weapons just beyond the steel doors, but somehow it had felt important to use this. Even if Hua Cheng was completely serious about gifting him the armoury and wanting him to stay at Paradise Manor indefinitely, a walking stick like this was something that Xie Lian could always find or make. No matter what happened, this would be reliable, and nothing about it was inherently aggressive. No one would look at it and see a threat. It would be just as easy — easier, really — to defend or disarm with this as it would be to injure. It was a sensible thing to train with, because it matched the way he chose to live whereas a spear or glaive, with its live steel, would not be.

There was more to this choice than simply wanting to spar, of course. He sparred frequently with Hua Cheng. It was entirely different want, a different need, a different loss that spurred him on now. It was a loss that he had chosen to ignore for so long, that he had bitterly accepted and buried deep in his guts, like shameful, writhing worms. Really, it was ridiculous that he had simply accepted this loss. He could have begun to fix it at any time. That was a condemnation. That was an incredibly hopeful promise. Now was as good as any to remedy it. Time to move forward.

So when Hua Cheng asked, "What were you trying?" Xie Lian thought he just might be ready to explain.

"Just some basic steps, it's been a long time since I've worked with a weapon with such a long reach… I preferred swords when I originally studied cultivation. Do you remember the other day, when I asked about cultivation texts in the library?"

The afternoon after visiting Black Water Island, in fact.

"Mm," Hua Cheng agreed, holding out his arm for Xie Lian as he began angling them out of the rain and towards the warm, dry house.

"Well, you know I've been reading through them."

A lot. Obsessively. Before bed, after waking up, before drifting off for a nap. He had even brought some with him to read while Hua Cheng dealt with ghost city business or to entertain himself with when he modelled for Hua Cheng in the sun room. As with anything, Hua Cheng had accepted this new interest as a matter of course and seemed to readily enjoy chatting with Xie Lian about what he was learning. It was no big thing to admit that he was interested in cultivation, that had been a staple truth of his life since Xie Lian had been old enough to understand what it was. It was the next bit that was harder to admit, and he had to practically punch the words out in a single breath to get them to be spoken at all.

"I'm looking for a new cultivation path."

Hua Cheng raised his brows as he held the door open for them and left the umbrella to dry against a wall. The roiling malevolence of the armoury made the room seem all the hotter and it really forced Xie Lian to realise how chilled he had become while outside.

"I didn't realise gege was interested in such a thing. Haven't you been practising the same one for quite a while?"

Since the very beginning. He was the last surviving person to practise that specific path of cultivation, as far as he knew, other than Mu Qing. There were many other similar ones, of course, but that had been his, as it had been taught to him by his Guoshi from almost a millennium ago. He wondered how much Hua Cheng knew about his cultivation path, how much there was still recorded about it. He wondered if he knew what it had forbidden.

If he said nothing about it, he was sure Hua Cheng would let it go and wouldn't press. So it was Xie Lian's job to say it. To admit to the shame, to lay himself bare.

(Hua Cheng had met Xie Lian when he had been bleeding and filthy and pathetic on the floor of his Gambler's Den and had chosen to bring him home regardless. Something made Xie Lian want to tear himself open and bleed at the Ghost King's feet again just to see if the same would still hold true, even months later.)

(Hua Cheng had seen his disgusting hair and offered to clean it. He had seen Xie Lian collapse on the floor in a heap and offered to support him. He had seen him writhing in pain and had offered to read him books and feed him fruit. Xie Lian wanted to spread his worst parts out for Hua Cheng's judgement because he was selfish and was coming to believe that, just maybe, Hua Cheng would continue to see every wretched part of him and still want to pick it up and hold it.)

"I have, and it doesn't really matter whether I cultivate or not. With the cursed shackles, it's not like I can actually access my spiritual power, so my cultivation is really just for myself." He didn't bother elaborating — with how well-read Hua Cheng was and with Yin Yu working for him, there was no doubt that Hua Cheng understood the concept perfectly, perhaps even better than Xie Lian. "But, well…"

"Naturally, even without spiritual power gege still wants to cultivate," said Hua Cheng, as he now led them down the halls towards Xie Lian's rooms. "And I'll always give you more spiritual power if you need it. Take as much as you want."

That was no lie, Hua Cheng was very generous. Feeling his lips brush the back of his hand before they sparred — or wandered the garden, or when a headache was brewing, or just because Hua Cheng seemed to think it needed topping up — had become very common. Sometimes Xie Lian practically thrummed with spiritual energy.

"It's not that," Xie Lian admitted. "I… My cultivation was based on… on abstinence. From worldly pleasures. And it… broke."

Silence, only their damp feet on the floor.

And then the killing aura was so thick that it seemed that even with concerted effort, Hua Cheng was struggling to contain it. Xie Lian shot him a startled look, but the Ghost King's expression hadn't changed, remaining carefully neutral.

"I see," said Hua Cheng.

It wasn't as if Hua Cheng didn't know what had been done to Xie Lian — he had been the one to wash his hair! He had been the one to pick his used, discarded body off the floor of the Gambler's Den! — but the admission really made Xie Lian want to curl up and hide. Pleasure. He had taken pleasure, somewhere in it all. He had let his cultivation break after eight hundred years and he had then left it discarded at his feet like trash. He had left it shattered and useless for months and months until he was suddenly reminded that he was capable of fixing what was broken. Had that not been how he had made his livelihood for years? Collecting useless scraps, ruined things, and trying to bring life back to them?

"It didn't break at first," he found himself saying as they walked, as if that could make things better. As if that could make up for the fact that it did, ultimately, break.

He looked everywhere but at Hua Cheng. Focused on keeping his stick moving in time with his steps even on the smooth floor of the manor. Learning how to use a stick as an actual walking aid was different than just as a plain hiking stick might be, and it took some concentration to figure out how to best use it. If he concentrated on that, he might be able to ignore the roiling shame.

"But… but eventually, I must have… I…"

"You did nothing. Nothing that happened was your fault." The words were so firm, so unyielding that they were like a nail drilled home.

"Ah, San Lang, there's no point arguing around the issue. What's done is done, and now—"

"No. Apologies, gege, but no. Whatever happened — whatever was done — wasn't your fault, whether your cultivation broke or not."

"Would it be so bad if it was?" Xie Lian asked, soft.

He wasn't sure why he was arguing, only that suddenly it mattered. It mattered that Xie Lian had reached completion while in that dark hut, had added to his own filth, had done it with the man's hands on his quivering body. It mattered that while his brain had been so twisted up in itself that something about the fear, the pain, the disgust had obviously managed to warp itself into something like pleasure. It was sick, and it was true, and he didn't know what to do if Hua Cheng saw that part of himself exposed and recoiled from it.

"If it… if I broke my cultivation, is it that bad?" How bad was it? How bad? How unforgivable?

He was already a laughingstock, a god of misfortune, but would this make Hua Cheng understand exactly how far he had fallen? That whatever beautiful, pure illustrations he had seen of the God-Pleasing Crown Prince, that Xie Lian was that no longer?

Hua Cheng made a dark, furious noise in the back of his throat, and his hand gripped Xie Lian's all the tighter. "No. If it were gege's choice, then it's gege's choice. If gege wanted to go into Ghost City now and sleep with every ghost who caught his eye, I would say they are the luckiest bastards in three realms. If gege wanted to indulge in every 'wordly pleasure' and never cultivate again, if you wanted to lounge around Paradise Manor in all manner of hedonism, I would encourage it whole-heartedly! Was that… *trash* , gege's choice?"

Xie Lian found himself blinking. His face was still damp and cold from the rain, but the wetness around his eyes and cheeks was now growing hot.

"No." It was a sad, broken, little word. Broken butterfly wings.

"Then there's nothing more to say. It wasn't your choice. It wasn't your fault. Whatever that trash broke is something he has to answer for, but gege isn't diminished by it. And if gege wants a new cultivation path, this San Lang will do whatever is in his power to help."

Xie Lian nodded mutely. His throat was too tight to say a single other thing until well after they had returned to Xie Lian's rooms and he had been able to change into warm, dry robes.

While Xie Lian changed, Hua Cheng brewed tea and a comforting cup was pressed immediately into Xie Lian's hands. Rather than sitting at the table, Hua Cheng chivvied him towards the bed and Xie Lian found he didn't mind in the slightest. Somehow, it felt good to not be kneeling at the low table and to instead be bundled beneath heavy, safe blankets with Hua Cheng at his side. It was indulgent to be in bed this early in the afternoon, even just as a place to sit rather than sleep, but it was nice.

Having Hua Cheng curl so close to him, despite everything, close enough that Xie Lian's feet could press against his calves, was also nice.

It unstuck some words.

"I found a cultivation path that seems interesting. It's less about holding oneself above worldly pleasures and more about moving with… with the world as a whole, I suppose. With the pleasures but also all the rest of it, like guiding a sampan along a river. It's about extending oneself to draw a source from the world, and to find balance there. It seems well

suited for staff fighting, since that's also about extending the body and careful balance. Overall, the cultivation path doesn't seem that far off from how I've already been living and keeps some methods that my original path held, so it should be an easy enough transition…"

"That sounds like a good choice," Hua Cheng agreed. "Since gege is no longer forced to abstain, does this mean we will get to go drinking together one evening?"

Xie Lian scoffed, relieved beyond word that Hua Cheng was treating this so lightly. "I was always allowed to drink. One drink wouldn't have broken my cultivation, even before."

"But not to excess, right? What if I wanted to get drunk with gege? I think we'd have fun."

"...I've never gone drinking just for fun," Xie Lian admitted, finding himself somewhat intrigued. He'd had a drink now and again, when social occasions called for it, but that had mostly been it. In all his eight hundred years of life, he had only truly been drunk the one time and he didn't care to remember it if he could help it. It had not been one of his better moments. Now he found himself intrigued to know what it would be like, to drink not out of obligation or misery, but simply for the joy of feeling warm and silly around a dear friend. He found it was rather appealing. Probably nothing he would want to do regularly, but to try it out… perhaps.

Perhaps it would feel good to choose to do something that would have broken his cultivation. To choose it, and to safely do it with someone he liked, and to genuinely enjoy it.

"Only if San Lang drinks with me."

"Of course, of course! This San Lang is always happy to help gege with new experiences!"

"Shameless!" Xie Lian laughed.

"Is there anything else I can do, to help gege cultivate a new path?"

That deep, shameful squirming in Xie Lian's guts was gone now, he realised. He wasn't sure at what point it had faded, but it was definitely gone. Hua Cheng was always so reliable, so stable, and he made choosing a new cultivation path after eight hundred years seem like the simplest thing in the world. Not a horrible secret or a great shame or a gruelling task, but something entertaining and fun and *shared* .

Xie Lian remembered his first banishment, how he had tried to cultivate with a desperation, a fervour, an immediate need to reclaim something he had lost. He remembered how he had felt like he was being driven half-mad and sick from the pressure of cultivating enough to ascend again so he could raise his family up out of the filth. He remembered how he had only managed to fall deeper and deeper into it. He remembered isolating himself, fighting everything, his fate, his failure, his cultivation, everything and everyone, he remembered pushing further and further away from the people near him and how they had opened their hands and allowed him to do so.

Hua Cheng's hand was curled around his under the blankets.

"There is something you could do," Xie Lian said. "Since this cultivation path is about connecting with the world around me, I think I'll have to see more of the world again."

Up until now, he had been perfectly content spending all of his time in Paradise Manor with Hua Cheng. Being able to stay in one place was such a novelty that he had felt no need to start wandering, and Hua Cheng made it easy to fill the days. But perhaps it was finally time to step away from the cloistered protection of the manor. The idea of seeing other people no longer felt terrifying, not as it had in the early days.

"Ah… has gege decided that he wishes to leave after all?" Hua Cheng asked carefully, eyeing him.

"No, no, I wasn't thinking anything so extreme! Though it would be good, at some point, to travel again… would it be an imposition to ask if San Lang would want to join me? I know you're busy in Ghost City, but having company…"

"Travelling with gege sounds much better than wasting time in this worthless city!" Hua Cheng answered at once.

Xie Lian grinned. "That's a shame, because I was thinking that before going anywhere so far afield, I'd really like to visit Ghost City. I would like to get to know your city properly."

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Chapter count update! Chapter 9 is still going to be the "official final chapter", but I've been tooling around with an epilogue for a while now and I think I'm finally satisfied enough with it to consider it a guaranteed thing instead of something I'll have to scrap!

"If gege grows tired please say so," Hua Cheng said as they approached the edge of the estate grounds. "This rabble has been dead so long they don't remember how to act. If you're fed up with them, then we'll ditch them and come home."

For all Hua Cheng's fretting though, Xie Lian seemed to be in very good spirits. After the confession yesterday, Hua Cheng really hadn't known if he could ever recover, he had been so consumed with fury and offense and horror that he thought he would surely split from it all. It wasn't, perhaps, a surprise to learn these details, but it had felt like being gutted all over again to hear it laid out so clearly, to really be forced to confront the horrific consequences heaped on his god's head. He wished he knew a single way to fix any of it. He had accrued wealth and power and luxury. He had built a fine manor, ruled a prominent city, had heaps of treasures, and had humbled gods and ghosts alike. He had done it all in the name of making himself into a tool that could serve his god in whatever way was necessary.

And now that his god was here and he could throw himself at his feet, there was really nothing he could do. Nothing but bear witness and do his best to hold tight to his god. Sometimes he felt as pathetic and small and useless as he had ever been. How was this any different than being a ghost fire forced to witness his god being slaughtered on his own altar, only able to burn it all down after the fact?

But His Highness was nothing if not resilient and here he was, committed to starting a whole new cultivation path after everything that had happened. And he was doing it with a smile. He was *smiling* at Hua Cheng, looking genuinely excited about visiting his city.

Hua Cheng sometimes just wanted to collapse into a cloud of butterflies when Xie Lian looked at him like that. It certainly felt like enough of them were living in his belly right now.

He was a little surprised by how much he wanted Xie Lian to like his city. He didn't generally have a good word to say for the sprawl that had grown up around his manor, barely spared it a thought in passing. It was just something to fill his time with, another point of power and prestige in his ledger, a toy to mess with when he was between leads searching for His Highness, but now that His Highness was here he found himself… nervous.

After all, His Highness had experienced it once already. By all accounts, he had been dragged through its streets, nearly incoherent with pain, and then gambled away to its demonic lord in

the evil halls of its gambling den.

Hua Cheng didn't know how he could ever want to see it again after that. He didn't know how Xie Lian hadn't asked him to just burn it to the ground rather than face it.

If Xie Lian asked, he would.

Instead, Xie Lian had one hand looped around Hua Cheng's arm, and his walking stick in his other. He was ready for a stroll, and his face practically shone with the anticipation of exploring somewhere new.

His Highness was the most marvellous person to have ever lived.

So, reining in his trepidation, he led him down into Ghost City.

"San Lang," Xie Lian gasped as they stepped onto the main street, practically spinning on the spot to take it all in.

Hua Cheng hovered but let him stare open-mouthed at it all. He was a little concerned about all this, because he knew that taking too much in at once was the best way to ensure Xie Lian would be plagued by a headache. But he did seem to be healing, however slowly, and was far from the state he had been in when just looking at the bright flowers in the gardens had overwhelmed him — and besides, Hua Cheng wasn't about to tell him what he could or could not do. Who could know His Highness's limits better than His Highness? So he would simply stand by and keep an eye on things and whisk him away if things seemed to be getting bad.

While Xie Lian stared at the city, the city stared back. It had been a long time since Hua Cheng had come to pay a visit to the city proper, so that was an excitement in and of itself. *"I've never seen this skin before, isn't it to die for?"* one female ghost was gushing to her companion. *"What do you mean 'die for', you hag? Aren't you already dead?"* another huffed back, and other such remarks were bandied about. Some were focused on Hua Cheng, many others were focused on the unexpected companion with whom he had entered the city. They were held somewhat at bay only because they weren't yet sure what sort of mood Hua Cheng was in and if he would welcome anyone approaching.

"What does gege think?" Hua Cheng asked, delicately taking Xie Lian's elbow once again when he was done gazing around.

"San Lang, it's amazing! I really didn't appreciate it at all the first time — it's so lively! … Ah, sorry, that's probably not the right way to word things…"

"I think the word you're searching for is unruly."

"Spirited," Xie Lian countered, which made Hua Cheng laugh.

Nearby ghosts gawped. Had any of them ever heard their Chengzhu laugh before? Perhaps, but only when it preceded some poor idiot being torn to pieces. This was new! This was exciting! It broke whatever stopper had held back the crowds before, because suddenly there was a crush of bodies around them, clamouring and talking and shouting.

Xie Lian knocked right up against Hua Cheng who wrapped an arm entirely around his back, to better keep him apart from the crowds and keep his steps steady as they continued down the street. This, of course, did nothing to quell the crowd's excitement but he was used to ignoring them. It wasn't hard when the person pressed so contentedly against his side was Xie Lian. And Xie Lian didn't look upset, perhaps just a little flustered at the attention, so Hua Cheng let it be.

"Where would gege like to go?"

"I really don't even know what's here… I'd just like to browse!"

So they wandered and admired the shops and stalls that sprouted along the main street. There were side streets that branched off, of course, but the the heart of Ghost City was this main market street, which stretched on an impossible distance, its size distorted by the ghostly aura that permeated it. It seemed to reach on indefinitely, and in this crossing of yin and yang energy that Hua Cheng had claimed for himself that wasn't too far off.

What was being sold was just as varied as the stores that held it all and Xie Lian seemed equally intrigued by it all. He admired painted fans and woven sashes and bright umbrellas. He complimented a rug seller and had to continuously turn down offers from jewellers who wanted to press baubles into his hands when he stopped to admire them.

He was just as courteous to the stalls that much more clearly sold the sorts of goods that only a ghost would want. He took it all in stride without passing any judgement beyond comments on aesthetic or function that he found interesting. He felt a wig-seller's wares with polite curiosity as the seller proudly described his "ethically sourced and 100% authentic human hair wigs, guaranteed not to rot in this decade". He turned down a pack of female ghosts who praised his face and tried to insist he let them use their cosmetics on him since he clearly didn't need to buy one of their fresh skins. He politely did not inquire about the sources of various bone ornamentation and listened as a big-horned ghoul expounded on the virtues of graveyard dirt under one's pillow at night.

"Is there anything you see that you'd like?" Hua Cheng asked, after Xie Lian managed to extract himself from a stall that seemed to sell backscratchers made of either yao claws or human fingernails (for people with a more delicate constitution).

"No, no, it's just fun to browse," Xie Lian said, half-collapsing back against Hua Cheng's side while he clung to his stick.

Hua Cheng inspected him, which wasn't hard since Xie Lian's eyes had closed briefly. That was usually a very clear sign that any physical exertion should be drawing to a close. It was near the time that Xie Lian often chose to nap, and they hadn't even eaten lunch yet.

"Is gege tired? Shall we return home?"

"Ah! No! I'm fine!" said Xie Lian, perking up immediately — only to reach out and clutch Hua Cheng's arm when vertigo obviously followed the sudden movement. "Really, I'm fine. It's a bit tiring being in a crowded market after so long, but I want to keep looking around."

Hua Cheng wasn't given a chance to decide if he should argue this or not before they were both suddenly struck by a horrible, bone-deep chill, like a winter wind had blown right off the mountains with the intent of freezing everyone in its wake.

Xie Lian shuddered sharply, while Hua Cheng spun to face the culprit. A barely visible wisp of a woman hovered behind them. The only thing anchoring her to the ground was her long, trailing hair.

"Do you mind?" Hua Cheng snarled.

The ghost stared vacantly at him before heaving another, mournful sigh that curled down the street like glacial wind. Hua Cheng was about a second away from drawing his sabre and scattering this ghost like the wind she mimicked when a flustered, red-skinned demon scurried out from behind a stall.

"Chengzhu! Please forgive 'er, Meimei isn't very aware! She means no disrespect! Really, she's a fine worker when she can keep 'er mind from driftin'!

"Indeed," said Hua Cheng, with mounting impatience.

Xie Lian watched with interest though when the red-skinned demon pulled out what looked like a pair of bellows and began blowing the wayward ghost back to his stall where a decapitated ghost, her head resting on the counter, helped get this Meimei settled back down. Back in her spot, and being comforted by the decapitated ghost, the mournful spirit let out another mighty sigh. This one was directed at a metal pot on the stall though that was glazed over with frost. After returning his bellows behind the stall, the red demon began stirring the pot.

"What are you making?" Xie Lian asked, stepping closer.

The demon looked overwhelmed — as was only natural with His Highness's full attention on you — and glanced over at Hua Cheng as if for permission. Hua Cheng nodded impatiently.

"Ice cream," said the demon. "Made with frozen milk an' rice an' fruit! Normally it's a real drag to get frozen treats like this in the summer, but with Meimei here it's almost harder not to!"

"Have you had ice cream before, gege?" Hua Cheng asked.

"I haven't, though I think I've heard of it. Back when I was young we had flavoured ice when it could be brought down from the mountains, but I think this process came after my time. … Though the ghost process seems quite innovative…"

The red-skinned demon and his compatriots seemed over the moon at this praise. Even the mournful ghost gave a sigh that was almost wistful instead of just miserable when the decapitated ghost explained matters to her. The demon was all too eager to feed his Chengzu's gege and immediately began rattling off flavours.

"Only the human friendly ones," Hua Cheng stressed before this too could go off the rails.

Xie Lian wound up with a bowl of black sesame flavoured ice cream, which he was eager to try. The moment it touched his tongue, his entire face lit up. His eyes were wide with delighted shock at either the temperature or the flavour, and his mouth split into a grin around the spoon. He positively glowed, and couldn't look any more different than he had yesterday afternoon, wet, and small, and disgusted.

Hua Cheng wasn't sure he could imagine a better feeling than knowing that his god was happy, and that it was in response to the city that Hua Cheng had been tending like a garden.

"Is it good?" he prompted, just to hear Xie Lian speak.

"En! Here, try some!"

And suddenly there was a spoonful of ice cream directly in front of his face. On a spoon that had, moments ago, been in Xie Lian's mouth.

Never mind, *this* was the the best feeling he could imagine. He ate it immediately, making no effort to take the spoon. The ghosts around them, naturally, exploded in cheers. It was only then that Xie Lian seemed to realise what exactly was happening. He laughed and flushed with embarrassment, pulling back.

"Ah, but San Lang probably wants his own!"

"Don't mind them, gege, they have no manners" said Hua Cheng with his best pout, "this one wants to share his gege's ice cream."

"San Lang is so shameless!"

Hua Cheng agreed readily, which made Xie Lian laugh and hold out another spoonful of ice cream, which was the perfect outcome. Hua Cheng ate it, shot a glare at the clamouring ghosts, and then began leading Xie Lian away from the fuss.

Seeing the success of the last vendor, it seemed to spur all the more ghosts into offering goods, though the bowl of ice cream in Xie Lian's hands gave him an easy excuse for not accepting it all. So they meandered down the stalls, taking turns eating the ice cream while it cheerfully melted in the sun, and continued to take in the sights and sounds of the city. It was bliss.

It didn't stop the fact that Xie Lian's steps were becoming slower and he was leaning more frequently against Hua Cheng than his stick, his eyes beginning to drift shut in the pretence of long, slow blinks as he let himself be guided.

As if sensing the suggestion that they return home though, Xie Lian suddenly said, "We should eat lunch, shouldn't we? This was a nice treat, but we should really have a meal while we're here. Is there a good place to eat?"

And, well, Hua Cheng couldn't refuse him.

They had to pass by a number of stalls before they found one that sold anything suitable for a human — never mind Dianxia — but when they did Hua Cheng led Xie Lian into a shop that

branded itself as "Authentic Mortal Cuisine". This was overselling things a bit, but it was a far step better than some of the other options out there, and Xie Lian may actually like to try some of the barbecued yao that it had on offer. It wasn't like that was easy to find in the mortal realm after all.

The shop still teamed with sights and sounds and noise, especially since a portion of the crowd seemed intent on filtering into the shop with them, but at least they were able to sit at a table. Xie Lian practically dropped to the ground, resting his body against the table in an undignified but clearly relieved manner. It did not help Hua Cheng's fretting, no matter how much he tried to keep it contained. When they were in Paradise Manor, if they were eating and Xie Lian was particularly exhausted from the day he often used Hua Cheng as a backrest, but here in public it seemed he was holding to some level of propriety and had taken his own side at the table.

"What should we order?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Something light… congee?"

So he didn't have much of an appetite. Not a good sign, if he was feeling nauseous. They would need to make this meal quick and leave quick.

"Surely Chengzhu would like something heartier to add to his meal! Consider this thigh, perfectly fresh!" cried one of the hanger-on ghosts, a boar-headed butcher.

"It reeks of blood, are you trying to put Chengzhu off his meal?" others roared back.

"Or Chengzhu's guest? He's too elegant to gnaw on your thigh! Look at him!"

"You've probably never even seen someone with the grace and elegance of Chengzhu or his guest before! Ignorant bumpkin!"

"No, no, I have seen someone like him before! I told you I recognized the guest with Chengzhu!" one voice said, almost lost in the din except for the way it cut through Hua Cheng like a knife. "Didn't I say I was at the Den when Chengzhu dealt with that double dealing mortal? He was with that mortal, he—"

His words cut off in a squeak. In fact, the noise in the room disappeared so suddenly, that Xie Lian opened his eyes and looked around. The long-necked man that had been bragging moments ago was ashen pale, even for a ghost. A silver butterfly balanced neatly on his brow.

Xie Lian blinked in quiet confusion, clearly not understanding what had happened or the rippling fear that was leading to other ghosts hastily backing away from the long-necked one, but there was no confusion among anyone else. If this ghost had been in the Gambler's Den that day, then he had certainly been told of Hua Cheng's edict about what was allowed to be said. Hua Cheng had monitored the gossip very carefully the first few days, when the incident was most fresh. There had been some talk at first, but without any of the lurid details that Hua Cheng had suppressed the interest in Hua Cheng and his prize from that day had faded quickly — it wasn't such a strange occurrence in the Gambler's Den after all. But it wouldn't do for someone to forget himself and start running his mouth now.

A reminder would do him good. The others too, a reminder to mind that anyone Hua Cheng showed favour to was someone to be respected unequivocally. Given that there was one single person in any of the three realms who he favoured, this should be easy for them.

"Were you going to call gege something?" Hua Cheng asked delicately.

The long-necked ghost stood in mute terror. The ghosts around him seemed to sense that things could get hairy very fast for him, and possibly for anyone else in his vicinity if they weren't careful.

"...If we are to call him anything, it should be grand-uncle, right?" one eel-skinned ghost offered hastily.

Others quickly joined in. "Yes! Yes! If Chengzhu is like our granddaddy, then his gege must surely be our grand-uncle!" "Of course we're excited to be meeting Grand-uncle!" "That's right Chengzhu and Chengzu's-friend! Our grand-uncle!"

The babble had started desperate but the ghost quickly seemed to warm to the sentiment and the noise and praise only grew. Never mind Xie Lian, Hua Cheng was the one who was going to wind up with a headache.

"Shut up," he said.

"Yes, Chengzhu! Shutting up!" the ghosts echoed with frantic obedience, though the tension eased when the butterfly took off and fluttered away from the long-necked ghost. It came to rest instead on Xie Lian's hand, which he had held out to it in welcome.

A shiver of deep-rooted awe passed through the ghosts who watched Xie Lian handle the wraith butterfly with such casualness. That should be enough to ensure respect in the future, though he would have to keep an eye on things again, to ensure no rumours were slipping between loose lips.

The rest of the meal passed in a much better atmosphere. Xie Lian ate about half his congee before begging off anymore, insisting he was full from the ice cream and turning down anyone that tried to suggest other foods he might like instead. Hua Cheng took his cue to stand and lead Xie Lian from the shop and back out into the street. It wasn't too hard passing through the mob, especially since the wraith butterfly was still sunning itself on Xie Lian's hair.

This had been a day the likes of which Hua Cheng would have never been able to imagine for himself. The idea of wandering a city with his most beloved, simply to have fun and enjoy the sun and one another's company? It was like a dream, and he was loathed for it to end. Given how hard Xie Lian had argued to stay longer, just a bit longer, suggested that he felt the same and that was somehow even better. Still, it was clearly time to wrap it up. The afternoon was growing late, and Xie Lian's energy was no longer just flagging but seemed entirely exhausted. Hua Cheng had taken his walking stick for him, and Xie Lian now had both hands curled around Hua Cheng's elbow, most of his weight pressed against his shoulder. Peeking down, he could see that his eyes, when they were open at all, were half-lidded and downcast.

"Is gege tired? I could call a step-litter to pick us up. Or carry gege, if you prefer." The last option he gave with a curl of humour, so it could be discarded as a joke, but even the possibility of doing so made his dead heart want to beat.

"Oh, no, I'm fine to walk. I'm not actually tired, I'm just… ah, I'm not sure I have the word for it."

Hua Cheng just hummed, and continued along a sedate pace towards the manor. When he got like this, Xie Lian often needed a bit more time to sort out what he wanted to say and Hua Cheng was in no rush.

"I'm overwhelmed?" Xie Lian offered eventually, tone uncertain.

"That's fair, that rabble is overwhelming. We could have left earlier if they were bothersome."

"No, no, I don't mean that at all… They're very sweet."

Hua Cheng snorted. He couldn't imagine that anyone else in existence would consider calling the residence of Ghost City "sweet". If they ever heard that they would truly become intolerable.

"It's just…" Xie Lian waved a hand vaguely before hooking it back around Hua Cheng's elbow. "A lot. A lot of things to see. And everything is very bright and loud."

"I should have brought gege home sooner," he said. At the time he hadn't wanted to argue with Xie Lian's wishes, but perhaps he had been neglectful by not pushing when he could see the clear signs that Xie Lian was starting to hurt, just as he had been at the armoury. It was an intimidating balance to maintain — the desire to give all without question competing with a duty of care.

"No, I never would have let you," Xie Lian said with a laugh. "I was having too much fun. I can't wait to come again. It's fine, really, I just have a bit of a headache now."

They walked a bit further. Their pace was slow but entirely unimpeded because Hua Cheng had released a larger cloud of butterflies to follow them, creating a very clear message that they were not to be approached or bothered while they walked. Though Hua Cheng knew that Xie Lian was being honest when he said he had enjoyed himself — it had been written in every smile he had given and every word he had spoken that entire day — he could see how his expression was slipping now, into something more morose. From the pain?

Eventually, Xie Lian spoke again. "…It does make me miss my hat, it really would have been perfect for this, I think."

Xie Lian lifted one hand from Hua Cheng's arms to brush absently at his hairline, as if imagining the wide brim of a hat.

"Does gege want a new hat? There are places to buy them in Ghost City. I could bring you to one tomorrow. Or I could purchase some and let gege pick one that he likes."

"Yes, I suppose I'll have to buy a new one soon," he said, without conviction. "That's probably another thing I've waited too long to do…"

Hua Cheng wasn't sure entirely what Xie Lian meant by that, and so waited to see if there would be more forthcoming. His god sounded sad, and he was barely reining in the desperate need to fix that.

Xie Lian glanced up at him, before giving him an unconvincing smile and tapping at his arm in a half-scolding manner. "Don't look at me like that, it really is fine. I just had an old hat for quite a while and I miss it. It's silly, it's not that hard to replace it."

"What happened to the old one?" Hua Cheng asked, almost fearing the answer.

"Ah. You know…" The fingers on Hua Cheng's arm clenched around his sleeves convulsively. "I… I lost it. I had it with me before— I had it while I was travelling on my own. But I lost it after that. I really can't say what happened to it."

Hua Cheng scowled into the dark, the anger those words spurred hot and immediate. Was there anything that vile piece of trash hadn't tried to strip from his god? There was a lot that Hua Cheng could never truly replace, could never fix, a lot of things for which could only stay by his god's side and assist with while time gradually allowed for healing, and the idea that yet another thing had been added to that list was intolerable.

"Tell this one where you last saw it, and I will see if I can find out what happened to it," he said, careful to modulate his voice away from the anger he felt. He wasn't sure he entirely succeeded, because he could see some ghosts shying even further away from them.

Xie Lian was very firmly not meeting his eyes, gaze locked somewhere on the ground. "I really couldn't even guess. I don't… I wasn't really… I can't really remember how we got to Ghost City the first time, so I wouldn't know how to retrace my steps... I wouldn't know where— where we— I'm not sure where I was — living — before arriving in the Gambler's Den. Or if I even had my hat in the hut. I could have lost in the mountains…?" A shudder. "I'm sorry, San Lang, I really don't know."

Hua Cheng reached over with his free hand, to hold one of the hands that had such a death grip on his sleeve. He stroked his thumb up and down the back of his god's hand until the tendons there began to ease slightly.

"Gege has nothing to apologise for," he murmured. "Nothing. This one will look into things, and gege needn't concern himself with any of it. Is that alright?"

Xie Lian said nothing, just nodded. The rest of the walk was quiet, and Xie Lian seemed relieved when they finally reached Paradise Manor. They hadn't even cleared the entry hall before he was sinking down to his knees in an almost boneless heap, sighing as he pressed against the floor. As ever, Hua Cheng had to swallow his distaste at seeing his god prostrated like that, and just commanded Yin Yu through the array to bring them pillows.

"Gege will be more comfortable on this," he coaxed once the pillows had been discreetly delivered.

Xie Lian let himself be moved onto a pillow, and once he was no longer on the hard floor he relaxed further. He nearly melted against Hua Cheng's side as he settled beside him. After another kè and some gentle prompting, Xie Lian's posture eased until he was no longer kneeling, and instead sitting sprawled against Hua Cheng's side like a pampered cat. It took another two kè before Xie Lian was ready to be gently encouraged into standing and retiring to the sun room.

He insisted he wasn't ready to sleep yet, and Hua Cheng believed him this time not because he didn't think he was tired but because he had the look he got when he knew nightmares were lurking at the edgse of his consciousness. If he was more comfortable resting in the sun room, then that was where they would rest.

"Sorry for making you sit on the floor."

"It was a pleasant rest after a long walk. Can I paint you while you rest?"

"Mm," Xie Lian agreed as he spread himself out on the sofa that he often sat on when he deigned to model for Hua Cheng. The moment his body touched the cushions he sighed and collapsed against the comfortable seat, one arm raising to cover his eyes and the other resting across his chest.

With the late afternoon sun painting him in deep oranges, it was a very intimate looking scene. Hua Cheng spoke a little of the pigments he was preparing — not enough that Xie Lian would feel obliged to respond, or even track the conversation if that was now beyond him, but enough to provide a familiar voice.

"You know, I think I've only ever seen you paint me since I've arrived," Xie Lian commented at some point, about half a sichen after they had returned to Paradise Manor, his voice a little stronger than it had been before. "What does San Lang paint when he doesn't have sleepy cultivators on his couch?"

"Perhaps all I paint is sleepy cultivators," said Hua Cheng, with entirely too much sincerity. He was certain he must be entirely transparent, but how could he lie? When Hua Cheng loved something, he loved it wholly. He painted Dianxia. It was the only thing he had any interest in painting. He occasionally dabbled in flowers or landscapes, but only ever as accents or backgrounds for the much more important centrepiece.

"San Lang has a narrow focus then."

"An expertise, I like to think."

Xie Lian hummed, soft and indulgent, and Hua Cheng just grinned and grinned and grinned as he used charcoal to sketch the initial lines on his silk.

It was long past that point that Xie Lian fell asleep and Hua Cheng carried him to the bedroom. However tempting as it was to begin his hat hunting that very night, it was clearly not destined to be. As much as his chest churned with the need to take care of this one single thing that he might actually be able to fix, to pry some tiny vestige of justice from the jaws of the mortal filth, being here, right now, was infinitely more important. When Xie Lian

twitched awake with nightmares that night and settled back against Hua Cheng's chest time and again, he knew he had made the right choice.

It could wait a couple days, until things had settled. It would give him time to plan in any case.

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Hua Cheng shifted his form as he stepped into the underground cells, to the same elegant young lord he had worn on his previous visits. There was something to be said for consistency. For anticipation.

For fear.

He let this form's soft, painted lips curl into a smile as he watched the way the man twitched and shook at just the sound of his boots in the stifling silence of the cells. Hua Cheng hardly needed to be here, the man could torture himself just fine all on his own. Not that that was as satisfying as a hands-on approach. It wasn't something he was able to indulge in often, not when his time was much better spent at Xie Lian's side, but he always made time for the occasional visit.

Now, though, he was here in the service of his god.

"Look at me."

The human did. It was truly disgusting, like looking at a starved rat. His shoulders were trembling under the strain of being bound behind his back, which made Hua Cheng want to sneer. The ropes were neither as tight as the ones he had found on his god, nor had they been on as long. The balance of justice and a human's physiology really was inconvenient.

"Please, please let me go," the human filth sobbed, as he did every time Hua Cheng visited. A slobbering and disgusting refrain. "Please, my lord, I'll do anything, anything. I've learnt my lesson, please."

Doubtful. And irrelevant to Hua Cheng. He was no teacher.

"I'll be going to your disgusting hovel tomorrow. Tell me where it is."

The man stared up at him for a moment, before his face twisted into something ugly and vicious. A snapping dog on a short chain. Not that Hua Cheng had actually bothered binding the human beyond the ropes on his wrist — the man was allowed to stand if he wished. In fact Hua Cheng would welcome his efforts; he had not left his feet in any state for that to be a pleasant experience.

"Why should I tell you or that *whore* anything," he spat. Literally. It splattered across Hua Cheng's boot.

It was honestly rather dull, witnessing this, he reflected as he wiped the tip of his boot against the man's cheek to clean it. If he wanted to make Hua Cheng angry, well, he had succeeded. Unfortunately for him, his anger did not flare bright and hot. A hot, bright anger was an anger

that could die as quickly as it could be raised. Hua Cheng was a Devastation, and that meant his very existence was forged through such raging, unrelenting, unstoppable resentment that it gave him the power to topple gods. Fury was an old friend to Hua Cheng, ever since he was a worthless scrap of flesh fighting in the streets and cowering in temples. But his was an anger that had simmered for eight hundred years and was not about to be wasted now on the likes of this.

An angry man might accidentally kill this mortal and end his suffering. Hua Cheng was a resentful man, with a tempered fury that he had turned into a tool for his god. A tool's entire purpose was to be useful, not to act rashly.

Once the boot was clean — or as clean as it could be after touching such filth, he would have to burn these — he snapped it back and kicked the man across the face. The noise he made was like something being trodden on as he tumbled across the room. Even this was unsatisfying. He had to pull his strength so much it was hardly a tap, and not enough to vent any real frustration. To do more though would be to end things. His Highness had been given no easy way out, so this trash was hardly about to get that.

Hua Cheng strolled up and let his boot rest against the nail head that protruded from the man's shoulder. This wound had grown infected and vile over his time in captivity — hot and fetid beneath his boot. One barely had to look at it these days, for it to burn with renewed agony. Sure enough, the mortal screamed and thrashed like a fish. Hua Cheng just let his foot rest there until the man had finally exhausted himself into silence.

"Your house?" he prompted.

The man could barely get the directions out between his wheezed sobs but he did finally manage it.

"And a piece of advice," Hua Cheng drawled, as he nudged the nail just for the interest of seeing new blood seep around the infected flesh. "I have, so far, made you suffer only a fraction of that which you put Dianxia through. I advise you not to call names which might remind me of what else you put him through, or I will ensure you get that experience as well. There are plenty of ghosts that would be willing to show you what it means to be a whore, and they're not confined to the limits of human anatomy. Understood?"

The man whimpered. "I do, I do, I apologise, I do, I'll never say something like that again, I swear, I swear…"

"You won't," Hua Cheng agreed. "You will never speak of him again. I don't want to hear his name on your tongue. I don't want to hear you imply a single thing about him. I am capable of making your time here significantly less comfortable than it is. Remember that."

And with that Hua Cheng left. He had a destination now and he did not intend to rest until he either accomplished his goal or confirmed without a doubt that it was impossible.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> OKAY! This is the Official Final Chapter that properly wraps up the themes and motifs I was trying to work with throughout this story! We made it!
>
> That being said, Chapter 10 will still come out sometime next week to serve as an epilogue / wrap up for some of the lingering questions. However I'm going to be off vacationing starting next weekend, so expect the next chapter to either come out early if I can manage it, or late it I can't...

Xie Lian stirred when the bed dipped and a body pressed against his own. Even in this half-asleep state this brought no feelings of anxiety, encouraged no dark memories. The sleeping mat from before had never been soft enough to dip. It had been a thin layer over a hard floor. This body next to his was nothing but a comfort.

Its previous absence was more confusing.

“San Lang?” he murmured.

“Keep sleeping, gege, it’s still early.”

“Where were you?”

“Just doing a chore, don’t worry about it.”

Well, if Hua Cheng said not to worry, then he wouldn’t. He shifted until he was repositioned more comfortably against Hua Cheng and let himself drift off. A part of himself wondered, from time to time, if they shouldn’t put a stop to this. It wasn’t like he was plagued by nightly terrors anymore, and when he did have nightmares they usually weren’t as dire as they had once been. There was really no reason for them to be pressed so close together, no reason for Hua Cheng not to sleep in his own bed.

But, well, Hua Cheng didn’t seem to mind, and Xie Lian preferred it, so why bother bringing it up at all? It was a sliver of selfishness, one of many that Hua Cheng seemed capable of stirring in his chest, but it was one that Xie Lian had come to cherish.

He slept until sunlight had begun to stream in through the window and Hua Cheng’s face had somehow ended up pressed against the back of his neck. His hair must be tickling Hua Cheng’s face like this, but he liked the way the ghost’s arms were wrapped around him now, a heavy, cool weight that kept him still and grounded even if his brain insisted the bed was moving or spinning as it tried to recalibrate things for the morning.

"Gege?"

"I'm awake."

"Mm."

Hua Cheng made no effort to move. That sliver of selfishness pricked deliciously and Xie Lian seriously considered going right back to sleep — it had been a couple days since their visit to Ghost City but he still felt like he was recovering from it and he had been sleepier than usual these past few days. He imagined an entire day spent like this, lying in bed, Hua Cheng draped over him, with no urgency or need to do anything else. If he did that though he would surely oversleep and wake up groggy, so with some reluctance he sat up and stretched.

Hua Cheng clung to him and whined.

"Are you still tired?" he asked the top of the Ghost King's head, which was a wild mess of flyaway hair. "You were up late seeing to chores, weren't you?"

Some grumbling came from the blankets, before Hua Cheng finally sat up too. Xie Lian had to cover his mouth to resist from laughing. The position he had slept in had really left his hair in a frightful state.

"Not that late," Hua Cheng said. "It was a trivial job. I'm awake."

"Want me to comb your hair?" Xie Lian offered on impulse. After all, he'd had his own hair brushed many times by now, but had not yet returned the favour. It suddenly seemed long overdue.

"If gege likes," which Xie Lian had come to learn was Hua Cheng carefully not saying how desperately he did want something. So he left Hua Cheng in the bed, fetched his walking stick, and went to grab the comb.

"Sit forward a little," Xie Lian encouraged once he was back, settling his stick against the wall and himself on the bed behind Hua Cheng.

"Gege will spoil me."

"You were working so diligently late last night, you must deserve it."

Hua Cheng shifted under the praise, before growing still as Xie Lian's hands brushed through his hair. This would be his first time brushing Hua Cheng's hair, so he was determined to take the responsibility seriously. First he reached over and undid the single braid Hua Cheng wore, fingering the red bead that hung from the end before setting it aside. Then he began to stroke the comb through it. Hua Cheng's hair wasn't as thick or as heavy as Xie Lian's own, and without that weight to hold it down it seemed to have a mind of its own.

"Is there a meaning behind the bead?" he asked, while he tried to coax the hair into lying flat. "You wear it whenever you're in your true form, but I don't think I've seen it in any of your others… it must be something important, right?"

Hua Cheng hesitated.

"Sorry if that's too personal of a question," Xie Lian corrected hastily. He tried to focus on navigating the comb around the string of Hua Cheng's eyepatch instead — it kept wanting to catch.

"Not at all, gege can ask me anything. It's a reminder of someone I care about very much."

Xie Lian felt his heart stutter and he fiercely forced away any thoughts that wanted to follow that painful staccato. How nice that Hua Cheng had someone he cared about! How nice that he had someone so precious that he always wanted to carry a memento of them around! Xie Lian combed determinedly as he filled his mind with cheer. He was just beginning to think of a way to voice these thoughts, when something a little more sensible and a little more authentic curled its way up past the artificial joy.

Why would Hua Cheng need a reminder like that? Why would Xie Lian have not met such a person the entire time he was here, if it was someone Hua Cheng cared about so greatly? Having Hua Cheng's regard was, after all, one of the greatest gifts one might be able to have, so who would ever choose not to be by him if they had the option? There must be a tragedy there, Xie Lian realised sobrely.

Not quite daring to question that further, Xie Lian made another pass of the comb and got it caught against the string again. He tutted.

"Would you mind if I took your eyepatch off, just while I brush your hair?"

This, apparently, was no safer of a topic to broach. This time Hua Cheng visibly stiffened.

"You don't have to," he reassured quickly.

"It's just that it's ugly."

"Nothing about San Lang is ugly."

He had said this already, he was sure, when they had first been discussing Hua Cheng's true form. Clearly there was something that made him doubt his own appearance, and it seemed so out of character for the confident Ghost King that Xie Lian found that it bothered him. Nothing should make someone like Hua Cheng feel self-conscious, and he would like to talk to whoever had done so in the first place. He had no problem repeating these words to Hua Cheng however many times it took in the meantime.

"You haven't seen it," Hua Cheng said distastefully.

"What if I took it down, and promised not to look?"

A hesitation, and then, "Alright. Gege may do whatever he likes."

Carefully, Xie Lian reached up and found the knot keeping the eyepatch in place. He undid it deftly, and placed it with just as much reverence next to the red coral bead. A shiver ran through Hua Cheng's back, but Xie Lian ran his hands soothingly through his hair. This

seemed to calm him, because he stilled and Xie Lian was able to continue combing with much less difficulty. The longer Xie Lian combed without making any comment about the eyepatch or what might be under it, the more Hua Cheng relaxed.

"Does San Lang have any plans for the day?" he asked. "I was wondering about finding a plot in the garden where we might plant some vegetables. It's hard to tell what the growing season is in the ghost realm, but the garden is so vibrant it seems worth a shot…"

Hua Cheng gave a mournful sigh. "I would like to do that very much, but pray gege starts without me. I have a chore to do."

"Another? What is it? Can I help?"

"It's tedious. Gege should play in the garden."

Xie Lian was all the more intrigued. Normally if it was something dull, Hua Cheng would just out and tell him what it was. In fact, Xie Lian often joined Hua Cheng when he had dull work — they would sit in his study and eat snacks and chat, or Xie Lian might read and offer opinions on whatever Hua Cheng was working on. Sometimes he scribed for Hua Cheng, which had brought Yin Yu nearly to grateful tears the first time he had done so. The only chores Xie Lian never accompanied Hua Cheng on were matters that required his presence in the Gambler's Den or the city, though Xie Lian found that now after having visited he wouldn't mind accompanying him on those tasks too, if allowed.

"Is it related to what you were doing last night?"

"...En. This one was attempting to locate your hat."

Whatever Xie Lian had been expecting, it hadn't been this. Perhaps it should have been. Had Hua Cheng not said he would look into Xie Lian's missing hat after their trip to Ghost City, when Xie Lian had let himself get so out of sorts? But thinking about the old hat made such painful things claw at him that he had just willed himself to write it off and forget about the whole matter, assuming Hua Cheng would too.

That had been a foolish assumption in hindsight. As if Hua Cheng ever ignored even the slightest suggestion that Xie Lian might want something. But he couldn't let Hua Cheng waste his time on something like this. It was too much.

"Isn't it ridiculous to put in that much effort for a hat? It can just be replaced."

He had replaced a lot of things since Hua Cheng had rescued him after all. He wore clean, new robes, with comfortable new boots, the old tatters long gone. Even his cultivation path was in the process of being replaced. What was one more thing? How could a hat feel like so much more?

"It could be," Hua Cheng allowed. "But it doesn't have to be. If it's out there, I'll find it, gege. Some things should be replaced, but some things can be fixed and some things can be found."

Without much conscious thought, Xie Lian's fingers found his own hair rather than Hua Cheng's. His smooth, clean, well cared for hair. He would have cut it off entirely. He would have sheared it and let it grow back new. It was Hua Cheng who had stilled his hand, who had taken the time to exorcise the filth from it, the horrible memories from it, and gently returned it to the way it had been before. It had taken time and effort and patience beyond measure — it wasn't something Xie Lian would have ever been able to do for himself. But he was grateful for it now. He was so grateful that Hua Cheng had been determined to fix it when Xie Lian had been only sick and desperate and indifferent.

Some things should be replaced. He did not regret choosing a new cultivation path. He didn't think he could ever return to his old one without feeling the way it had broken in his chest, or feeling what had been done to cause it. He also didn't regret what this new cultivation path gave him, the new avenues of living that it opened up. He genuinely enjoyed getting to explore this new path with Hua Cheng.

Some things, though, deserved to be looked for. Even a fallen, broken, lost thing should be given the care and consideration to be found and repaired and healed.

"But it's such a big area to search through," said Xie Lian, returning his attention back to combing, grateful that Hua Cheng couldn't see his expression. "There was an entire village — an entire mountain! It could be anywhere, I don't…"

Hua Cheng shrugged. "Then I'll search through the village. And if it's not there, I'll search over the mountain. I've spent a lot more time searching in a much bigger area than that."

Xie Lian almost asked what it was that Hua Cheng had gotten so much practice searching for, almost asked if this was related to the business that Yin Yu had mentioned about Hua Cheng frequently needing to travel. Almost. And then he remembered He Xuan's words, his suggestion that Hua Cheng had been *looking* for Xie Lian. Xie Lian, who wasn't just a bauble or an oddity but someone Hua Cheng had wanted to find only because it was *him* .

The very thought felt too massive, too presumptuous. It was hard to even look at directly.

"Is that alright?" Hua Cheng asked after a moment. Xie Lian realised his hands had stilled in shock and that Hua Cheng probably assumed he was reacting to his suggestion about the hat.

"It is," Xie Lian said hastily, attempting to move past the large, looming possibility that it was *him* that Hua Cheng had been searching for over years. "Just… just let me think for a moment. I might… I may remember something useful, so then you're not searching everywhere."

He had spent a lot of time not thinking, not remembering. It was easy to blame a lot of that on the nail. The way it had stolen any capacity to string thoughts and memories together had been a horrific, nauseating reality. But it hadn't been the only reality. Xie Lian hadn't only feared it; at times he had also been grateful for it. He had been grateful for the oblivion. For the black patches in his memory. Sometimes he had even sought it out.

He had never made an effort to remember his time with the man.

He had always shied away from it.

He had tried to escape it in every little way he could, even if had meant the destruction of his own brain.

But it was over now, and Hua Cheng was with him, and just maybe he could hold those broken porcelain shards of his memory without immediately cutting himself to ribbons.

"Let me think?" he repeated.

Hua Cheng just nodded, patient as always to wait for Xie Lian.

So Xie Lian breathed. He focused on the soft bed beneath him, and Hua Cheng's soft hair in his hands. He focused on the way Ruoye was curled around his arm, and the way E-Ming and his walking stick rested in the sun against the wall. He focused on the easy, undemanding comforts of Paradise Manor.

And he took the time to remember.

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The weather had been pleasant, just before it all began. The sun had been shining but not overly warm, and the breeze in the mountains had been refreshing. Xie Lian had been wearing his hat around his shoulders, the cord a familiar weight against his neck. It had been tied on well.

It had stayed tied when he had run into a man dragging a pull-cart. It had stayed tied when the man had yelled and snarled, accusing Xie Lian of taking up too much space on the narrow path. It had stayed tied when Xie Lian had tried to soothe the man's temper and had backed away against a low fence that bordered the path to give as much space as he could. It had stayed tied when the man, rather than being pacified, had only grown angrier at finding nothing to vent his frustration at and had therefore chosen to strike out blindly. It had stayed tied when Xie Lian had attempted to back further away from the blows, only for his heel to catch a root and for the man's fist to catch him across his chest. It had stayed tied when the ground had slipped out from under him, and he had fallen.

It had stayed tied when Xie Lian had crashed back across the low fence, the post piercing through his gut. He knew this despite how awareness dripped away like the blood from his belly, because he remembered the uncomfortable tug of the cord around his neck as his hat hung lifelessly behind him.

It had stayed tied after his body had jerked back to painful awareness and had thrashed and lurched itself off the post, back onto the path. It had stayed tied, hanging like a shackle around his neck, as his body had convulsed from the skewering and while the man had shrieked and panicked and struck at Xie Lian, not with his hands this time.

There wasn't much Xie Lian remembered of that time, even with effort; it was just fragments. He didn't want to remember more. He wanted to forget what he did remember. But there were fragments.

Ruoye fighting against where it had been bound around his wrists. The smell of split wood that had been intended as a coffin — another coffin, he couldn't do another coffin. The driving force of the nail as it shattered through the protective layer of his skull. The press of crumpled bamboo beneath his back, like broken butterfly wings.

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It had no longer been tied when he was in the hut. It couldn't have been. Not that he had paid it much attention. In those early days, there had been too little brain left to think with, and too many other things to notice. Colour, smell, sound, touch, touch, touch, scrape, drag, hurt, spinning — that had been the only things his mind had comprehended for much too long.

And then after that, even after his brain had begun to heal around the nail, his world had stayed narrow. Four walls. Dirty floor. Boots. His own clothes. The man's clothes. Their relative position at any moment, which was of vital importance to him. Throbbing from his head. Throbbing from his bound hands. Throbbing from lower as his cultivation and dignity were shattered.

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He didn't want to look at these memories. He had attacked his own mind at the time, hammering at it like porcelain that could be shattered and rearranged into a more pleasing shapes. He would rather think about Before, when he had travelled and simply appreciated what the world and his luck had to offer. He would much rather think about After, with the sweet and indulgent San Lang.

But like broken porcelain, the memories were innumerable and prone to cutting. They pierced his skin, dug deep, deeper even than the nail, made him bleed and cry with this indifferent cruelty.

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So he knew that the hat had not been tied to him in the hut.

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A porcelain shard: he had lain on his back, another body over his, legs between his, thrusting thrusting thrusting, and his back had scraped across the floor and he knew it was flat to the floor because his robes had been mostly off, knotted around his arms, and he had felt splinters between his shoulder blades. There had been no bamboo hat to protect him, just the scrape, scrape, scrape of floor while he was rutted against for the sake of another's pleasure. He was nothing but a stick of ink being worn down against a stone, being turned into a black stain.

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Another, digging porcelain shard, bleeding him: on his feet, cheek pressed against a table, legs not wanting to support him. The weight of a body against him was nothing, barely there, but there was a hand in his hair and it made the nail shift and that made his vision swirl and

the table kept jerking and it was making him ill. He wanted to curl up on the floor where the world was still. Hips knocking against his own. Heavy breath. Release. Heat burning him from the inside out, sticky and repugnant, making him gag because his mind struggled with sensations and the feeling was like a taste was like a smell and it was too much. Body pressing across his back, mouth biting into his shoulder, pressing against skin until heat bloomed there as well, coppery blood rather than bitter spend. No hat tied to his shoulders to block the man's mouth.

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Another shard, and Xie Lian wished he could just claw his fingers past his skull, sink his dull nails into the soft tissue beneath the bone and claw at it until he could pull every porcelain shard out: on his back again, robes twisted and choking. He had been thrown to the ground and he couldn't remember why because his head had made contact with the floor, had struck the nail like a hammer, and there was the taste of bile in his mouth and no memories but blackness that preceded this. His head had been to the side, but everything around him had been only the vaguest impression of shapes. Square shadow of table, rectangular jag of screen, triangular wedge just at the edge of his sight, jutting upward, like a knife, a nail, and Xie Lian had let himself think about throwing himself upon it. If he could pierce himself on its point, would the death take? Would it at least buy him a few minutes of oblivion? Except it wouldn't, because slowly the world came into focus and the point wasn't a knife nor a nail but rather a harmless cone of bamboo. A hat. Useless.

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"—you're okay, you're okay…"

Such a familiar mantra. It made Xie Lian want to laugh, at how often he could hear it and still not have his body know it. Or maybe it just made him want to cry in frustration at it all. Instead he just let Hua Cheng hold him as the memories settled too real and too known into a brain that was much more equipped to remember things these days.

"You're safe," Hua Cheng whispered, a hand soothing down his back.

Xie Lian was no longer facing Hua Cheng's back, so he let his head rest against his shoulder without shame and gave himself the time to recover from where his memories had led him. It was only after he felt less like throwing up, less like he had an impossible weight buried in his skull, that he carefully nodded his agreement. He was safe. He knew it.

And he actually did know it. For all that the memories sat heavier in his head than usual, they didn't feel quite so much like they had their teeth in him. There was a bit more distance there than he was used to after daring to think about such things.

He looked up at Hua Cheng to tell him what he had remembered, but he found his words catching. Hua Cheng's expression was focused entirely on him, clearly still concerned, but the one eye was still entirely bare. He hadn't even paused to put his eyepatch back on before turning to face Xie Lian once he realised he was in distress.

The skin around the eye socket was heavily scarred, and the way the eyelid sat made Xie Lian suspect that there was nothing underneath it. Just a hole of something that had once been. Something that Hua Cheng had lost.

It wasn't the old injury that made Xie Lian hesitate though, but the vulnerability to letting him see this when Hua Cheng clearly had wanted to keep it private, clearly did not show this to anyone. And yet he was showing it to Xie Lian now, even if his hand had been forced.

Hua Cheng seemed to realise where Xie Lian's gaze had gone because he flinched, made to turn away, but Xie Lian caught his hands. Held him still.

"Thank you," he said, and he wasn't entirely sure what he was thanking Hua Cheng for. Just for all of it. All of it.

Swallowing, Xie Lian worked up the nerve to add, "I think… I think the hat might still be in the hut. I don't know where that hut is but… unless it was thrown away, I remember it making it there. It wasn't lost in the mountains."

Hua Cheng let out a breath and nodded, head still angled slightly away, so that his hair fell across the scarred eye, but no longer attempting to hide it completely. "I know where the hut is. I can go there now and check."

Xie Lian wondered if he should ask how, in only a couple days, he had figured out where the man had come from. Perhaps something about the wards of Ghost City let its lord identify where visitors had been entered from. Perhaps something about the way Ghost City interacted with the mortal realm helped narrow down which entry points would have been available the night Xie Lian had arrived. Perhaps he had noticed something about the man that Xie Lian hadn't — a manner of speech or dress that suggested a particular region.

Perhaps. But Xie Lian doubted it. Hua Cheng would have told him if he had done something particularly clever, he suspected. There was only one way of achieving this information that Xie Lian could think of that Hua Cheng would prefer to omit.

Briefly he wondered if he should say something.

He considered it, and then discarded it.

Today was likely to be an ordeal all on its own, without adding any further complexities to it. Thinking about what had been done to him was already taxing. He could think about the future later.

"I'd like to go with you," he said instead.

"Gege doesn't have to…"

"I know. But I think I want to. Does that make sense?"

Hua Cheng nodded.

So Xie Lian took a breath, and another, and then picked the comb up. There was no point letting himself be worked up over this. Weeks ago, he had once been crouched in the halls of Paradise Manor, too wrecked to even stand on his own and walk to a garden. But he pressed through that and found beauty on the other side. He could press through this, as long as he had Hua Cheng there with him.

"Let me finish combing your hair first."

Hua Cheng turned obediently back around. It gave them both a moment to compose themselves. Xie Lian wondered if it was as meditative for Hua Cheng as it was for him. Eventually Hua Cheng's hair had been compelled back into order. Xie Lian shifted slightly, moving in front of Hua Cheng to pick up the eyepatch. Hua Cheng, whose expression had been soft and lax enough to suggest that he did find hair combing as comforting as Xie Lian, started at this.

"You doesn't have to—"

"May I?" Xie Lian asked, rather than letting Hua Cheng work himself into a state. He would be selfish. He would ask. It never hurt to ask when it was Hua Cheng. "I took it off and I made San Lang uncomfortable, so I would like to put it back in place if that's alright."

"If gege wants to..."

So Xie Lian leaned towards him and repositioned the eyepatch. In truth he had never had to consider how one put on an eyepatch so it was a little cumbersome, but he managed to tie it neatly and it seemed to sit in its proper spot so he assumed it would do. Hua Cheng could fix it if need be.

"It's not ugly," Xie Lian added lightly, as if remarking on the weather, as he picked up the red bead and reached out for several strands of hair to braid.

"Gege…" Disbelief was clear in his voice.

"I mean it. It looks like it was hurt quite badly, but something being hurt doesn't make it ugly. Does it pain you?"

Several expression flitted across Hua Cheng's face but he couldn't look away, not while Xie Lian was braiding his hair. "No, it doesn't hurt. …I did it to myself. It was something ugly even before this."

Xie Lian may not know the details, but he thought he could understand this too. To hate something so fiercely that you only wished you could claw yourself bloody to free yourself of it.

"I'm glad it doesn't hurt. Though whatever was there before, I'm sure it wasn't ugly either. Nothing about San Lang is ugly… Oh." Xie Lian stared in some chagrin at the crooked little braid that he had formed. "...Well, perhaps one thing."

And just like that, the tension in Hua Cheng split as he glanced down at the braid and chuckled at Xie Lian's dismay.

"That's the most beautiful part," Hua Cheng said decisively, plucking his bead from Xie Lian's hands and deftly securing it. When Xie Lian weakly offered to try to fix it, he was resolutely rebuked. "Now let me return the favour for gege."

And so, despite the task that loomed before them, the morning progressed gently and leisurely. Hua Cheng brushed his hair slowly, with much more attention than some night tangles demanded. They dressed, Xie Lian taking the time to ensure his ring sat securely beneath his robes, and they went to the kitchens to prepare breakfast themselves rather than have Yin Yu deliver something. It was a light one, presumably because Hua Cheng guessed that Xie Lian wouldn't be up for anything heavy, not with anticipation filling half his stomach already.

And then there was nothing left to do but go. Xie Lian took his walking stick in one hand, and Hua Cheng's arm in the other. With a flick of his dice, Hua Cheng led them through the bedroom door and out into a small village.

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To say it was familiar would be a lie. Xie Lian had presumably seen it at some point — when he had first been brought to the hut from the mountains, and again when he was dragged out to be taken to Ghost City — but it had left no impression. It looked like any other village.

A few of the people who were out and about gave them strange looks but no one's gaze lingered over Xie Lian in particular. He got no impression that any of them recognised him.

Had they known about him? Had they known about the hut? Had they had any inkling of what was being done in their own village?

Had they chosen to leave Xie Lian there, because doing something to stop it would have been too much effort? Had they left him on that floor, in much the same way an entire city had left him lying in the streets pinned by a sword, fearing the misfortune that might rain down on them for lending a helping hand?

Xie Lian shivered, but Hua Cheng was there steadying him.

"It's this way," Hua Cheng said softly, leading them down the dirt road, completely disinterested in the looks they were receiving.

And there it was. If Xie Lian had simply been passing through this village in the future, would he have even recognized it for what it was? Looking at it now, with the full weight of memory, it seemed to exude a menacing aura but in reality it was just a simple labourer's hut. Nothing lavish, but in reasonably good repair. The front garden had been left untended and had been allowed to grow wild. There was a pull-cart full of lumber and tools sitting next to it that had been left to the elements. The whole place had a distinctly neglected quality. It was really quite small, its walls thin and unremarkable. Walking up and entering would be a very simple thing.

Xie Lian found himself rooted to the spot.

Hua Cheng stood beside him.

"Are you looking for Lao-Ding?" a woman asked eventually.

She had a basket of washing on her hip, and was staring at them with naked curiosity. Besides being obvious strangers to the village, they both wore robes that were much too fine for this poor region.

"Who?" Xie Lian asked after taking a moment to remember that he *could* speak, that his words were no longer a mess of tangled string in his brain.

Her expression became increasingly skeptical. "Lao-Ding, the carpenter who lives here? If he's in some sort of trouble, there's no point looking here, he hasn't been back in months. Everyone assumes he's looking for work elsewhere, he kept complaining about how there's none to be had around here… Or else that he got into a fight with the wrong person and is in hiding. Does he owe you money or something?"

"Or something," Hua Cheng said, with a dangerous smile. "Thank you for your help, we'll check things out for ourselves."

For all he was ostensibly giving thanks, his tone brooked no argument. The woman seemed taken aback, perhaps reluctant to let strangers break into a neighbour's house as they clearly intended to, but then her eyes jumped to the wealth of silver that Hua Cheng wore on his person, and then down the sinister scimitar that hung at his waist.

She quickly turned and left.

Hua Cheng sneered after her before turning back to Xie Lian, expression softening immediately. "Gege is welcome to wait out here, you needn't come in. No reason to expose yourself to this filth…"

Xie Lian took a hard breath, stirred back into action by Hua Cheng's words. "I've already been exposed," he said plainly. "I don't see how it could possibly make me any dirtier than it already has."

Hua Cheng flinched as if slapped. "I didn't mean—"

"I know. I know." Xie Lian reached out, placing his hand gently over Hua Cheng's. "I know. And no matter how much I'd never like to think of this place again, I think going in there might help me know it really is over. I need to do this. Please be patient with me."

"Always."

And so with one final, fortifying breath, Xie Lian gripped his walking stick and stepped forward, Hua Cheng a reassuring presence at his back.

In many ways, it was exactly as Xie Lian remembered it. Four walls. Dirty floor. Small, like a coffin. In other ways, it was so much worse because now Xie Lian was seeing it with a sharp,

clear focus.

It was… just a labourer's hut, and in its mundanity lay the horror. A single room, not nefarious in any particular way. It was filled with simple, sturdy furniture, likely made by the man's own hands. There was a cooking hearth against one wall, a table in the middle of the room, even an ancestral shine under one window. There were shelves and cupboards, hooks for holding outerwear and tools. In one corner was a pair of wooden privacy screens which Xie Lian knew cordoned off a sleeping space. The most unpleasant thing about the whole room, to anyone else's eyes, was the smell of food that had been left to rot. The rest was perfectly benign, if plain and in need of a dusting.

But below that thin veneer of mundanity was every nightmare that clung to the inside of Xie Lian's head, sticky as spider silk. He knew how it felt to be bent over the table, or to have food tossed beneath it for him to try to eat without use of his hands. He knew how it felt to be knocked carelessly against the cupboard. He knew the exact smell of the bedding beyond the privacy screens.

He hadn't realised the tremor that was working up his back until one of San Lang's good, steadying hands rested against it.

"Gege?" he prompted. He took a step closer to Xie Lian.

A step closer which also meant a step further into the hut, which meant Hua Cheng's feet were touching the floor and Xie Lian *knew* that floor. He knew how its grit felt beneath his palms. He knew how it had bitten and clawed at his back. He knew the filth on it, he knew how spend had dripped from between his legs, down in globs from his hair, his cheeks, from his own body when the fingers twisting beneath him had had the desired result, he knew how it had splattered the floor and dried and Hua Cheng's feet were touching all that and—

"Gege!" Hua Cheng said with more force, when Xie Lian had suddenly stumbled back into him.

No, not just stumbled, pushed. He had stepped back, hands pressing flat against Hua Cheng who he knew was behind him, and shoved. Hua Cheng, not expecting it, stumbled back a step.

"Get out," Xie Lian choked. "Get out. San Lang, you need to get out."

"Let's go then, gege."

Except didn't he understand that that was wrong? Let's. Let us. There was no us here, there was only himself and San Lang. San Lang was beautiful, elegant halls and flower gardens and a vibrant city and every good thing in Xie Lian's life right now. This was an abyss, and Xie Lian was tipping back into it. Hua Cheng didn't belong in this dirty room, where Xie Lian's filth had been spread across every surface and structure. Where Xie Lian had been stripped from himself, his brain shredded, his body destroyed, every vestige of personality, feeling, dignity wrenched from him like an unwanted orgasm.

He wasn't actually sure he was breathing right now. His chest felt too heavy. He felt like he had died in this room and only just realised he was a ghost in its coffin. He was getting dizzy. His eyes were burning and the room was swimming and he needed to make it stop, he needed to stop, he needed to stop thinking before he made memories he didn't want, he needed to stop seeing, feeling, tasting it all before he threw up. He needed to get down, where it was safe and still and—

His knees were caving, trying to save him, trying to drop him down to where it was still, but suddenly there were *arms* on him, *hands* , and they were grabbing him, and moving him, and he sobbed.

"Gege. Gege, gege, Xie Lian, Dianxia."

He was being held. Cold, solid hands under him. Cold, solid ring pressed against his breast. Cradled against a cold, solid chest. The man had never held him, he wouldn't have been able to. Even underfed, Xie Lian was not a small man. He had a stature that made him ungainly, and the frame of a martial god. He had been dragged, shoved, kicked, groped, but never held.

Xie Lian blinked, and the dizziness increased only to spill over — not true dizziness then. It was the tears in his eyes that had been making the room swim, not the nail in his head. In front of him was bright red, richly dyed fabric. Nothing so fine had ever entered this hut. Xie Lian pressed his face against it until the only thing he saw was red, was Hua Cheng, and the only thing he smelt was Hua Cheng and the incense he favoured, and the only thing he heard was his voice which was whispering Xie Lian's name.

Xie Lian clung on, far above the floor, and cried. He cried and cried and cried without shame, he had no shame left, he just cried and it felt like he was being cut open and spilled out and Hua Cheng held him through it all, one hand stroking through his hair in a way that would have once been horrible and now was wonderful. With each pass of his hand there was no glimmer of pain, not vestige of the nail, not a single knot in that long hair. It was only Hua Cheng, somehow holding his unwieldy self safely above it all.

It seemed like the tears would never stop until they did.

Somehow, Xie Lian felt as light as he had the first morning he had woken up without the nail. Like he might float away if he didn't hold tight to someone.

They were outside the hut, outside the town, sitting at the edge of the forest. Or rather, Hua Cheng was sitting, and Xie Lian was tucked into his lap, face still pressed against Hua Cheng's now very soggy shoulder. He was still stroking Xie Lian's hair.

"San Lang." His voice sounded wrecked. He had to clear his throat and try again. "Thank you. I feel better, San Lang."

"Gege shouldn't thank me for anything." Somehow, Hua Cheng's voice sounded as shattered as his own. "I'm sorry for taking you to such a place."

Xie Lian sat back a little, and Hua Cheng moved with him so that Xie Lian could find a comfortable position to look Hua Cheng in the eye without actually getting off his lap. And

he did look Hua Cheng in the eye, because he needed his soft-hearted ghost to understand this.

"I mean it. Thank you, San Lang. Thank you for being with me for that, I couldn't have done that on my own. Thank you for having patience with me. ...I think I'm ready to go back now."

Hua Cheng baulked. "I can go—"

"I know you can. But so can I. As long as you're with me, I can go. If my hat is there, I don't want him to have taken it from me. I can go back as many times as I need to in order to get it, as long as you're with me."

Hua Cheng still looked very unhappy about this.

No, unhappy was how Hua Cheng looked when he realised that Xie Lian had pushed himself a little too hard during the day and given himself a headache. Unhappy was how he looked when He Xuan said something that monopolised Xie Lian's attention for the moment.

What he looked now was distraught. He was clearly trying to keep it off his face, but the lines around his eye, the strain around his mouth, the tension of the shoulder under Xie Lian's hand… he had spent so much time around Hua Cheng over the past few months that it would be impossible not to see it. He looked as ruined as Xie Lian felt, like he was facing an unspeakable torment and being asked to return to it.

Xie Lian was not the only one struggling in this moment.

"Is there something that would make San Lang feel better about returning?"

Hua Cheng looked startled by the question and his mouth opened immediately to give a response, but then paused, like he was actually giving this some thought. He worried at his lip for a moment, before he made his request, not quite meeting Xie Lian's eyes as he did so.

"May this one carry you? I know it's undignified, but it would make this one feel better."

Something that was almost a laugh scratched up from Xie Lian's abused throat, shocked by the request. "You can't carry me the whole time!"

"I can." He probably could too, come to think of it.

"And that would make you feel better?" Perhaps it was fair. He had needed to pluck Xie Lian up and whisk him away once, he might not trust Xie Lian not to fall and hurt himself. Xie Lian couldn't say with confidence that he wouldn't grow faint again, after all.

But Hua Cheng hesitated once more before admitting, "I don't like seeing you on the floor. Gege, I hate it. If I can't even kneel for you, then how can I stand watching you be forced to your knees for people like this?"

"Can't kneel for me? What does that mean?" Xie Lian asked, rather bemused. He felt like he had missed something, but Hua Cheng seemed to be growing more distraught, not less. Hua

Cheng had whisked Xie Lian to safety at the first sign of his distress, yet here Xie Lian sat now completely unsure what was wrong or how to help as Hua Cheng seemed to unravel under his hands. Though he sat perfectly still, silent and unmoving in a way only ghosts could manage, Xie Lian could see the way his lashes were beginning to clump together when he blinked.

Xie Lian hadn't actually known ghosts could cry.

Xie Lian absolutely never wanted to see it happen ever again.

Before he could think better of it, he curled his hands around Hua Cheng's cheeks and raised his face, so they were eye to eye. Even then, Hua Cheng seemed to want to flinch away from Xie Lian's gaze, but he didn't relent. He didn't want Hua Cheng to turn away from him, he didn't want him to feel like he had to face this, whatever it was, alone. If Hua Cheng could help him through every awful moment of his recovery, how could he let Hua Cheng go, with whatever was distressing him left unvoiced and festering? They had lived through one colossal misunderstanding once, certainly they could do so again.

"Tell me what you mean, you can't kneel?" Xie Lian insisted. They often knelt together. At the table over meals, or in the garden if they had stopped to sit in the grass or work with the flowers, or even if Xie Lian's legs failed him, Hua Cheng would often kneel down with him until he was ready to stand. So what exactly did he mean now, and how did it relate to the hut?

Hua Cheng fidgeted and glanced at Xie Lian through his lashes but Xie Lian just sat on his lap and waited. Hua Cheng often waited for him to find words, he could wait now.

"Dianxia doesn't want his worshippers to kneel for him," Hua Cheng finally whispered.

It wasn't the first time Hua Cheng had called him that old title, but he had never taken it particularly seriously. He knew that Hua Cheng had some idea of who he was, and if it amused him to call him by that name it didn't particularly bother Xie Lian. Hua Cheng was always sincere when he spoke, and he never used his title in a scornful way like many had before, but the way he said it now, the gravitas to it…

The worship.

His title hadn't been spoken in such a way in centuries.

Xie Lian sat and digested this statement. In truth, he wasn't sure if he was surprised by it or not. In truth it didn't say anything that he didn't already know — that Hua Cheng knew about his time as a god — and yet the way he said, the conviction, it hit Xie Lian abruptly. Hua Cheng had been looking for him. That felt like an undeniable truth by now. He had been searching for him, personally, with enough intention that even his fellow Ghost King knew it. He had saved him only because Xie Lian was Xie Lian. He knew him and cared for him. All the pieces had been there and yet it was the single statement that somehow jostled them in away that made them fit together in Xie Lian's mind. The shape they formed though seemed entirely impossible to comprehend. He didn't even know how to frame the questions that grew bigger and bigger in his chest alongside this realisation until he had to ask *something* .

"San Lang, how old are you?"

"A few years younger than you, gege."

A few. A few years out of hundreds. A few compared to nearly a millennium of existence. Surely that didn't mean…

"I remember when you ascended." He said it like a confession at an altar. "I didn't read about you. You've always been my god, gege. You are my only god."

"You're from Xianle."

"Yes."

"I…" It felt a little like the floor had disappeared from under him, which was ludicrous since he was still sitting comfortably on Hua Cheng's lap. He had thought he understood though. There had been gaps, questions, but they had seemed relatively minor, like details that Xie Lian might learn over time. Everything had made sense. Just as it had when he had thought himself a collectable toy, he thought rather bitterly. What an idiot he could be.

Now nothing made sense. It was one thing to read about an exiled god and develop a sort of respect. It was another to search for and rescue this god you had grown a compassionate interest in and develop a true friendship.

It was another thing entirely for Hua Cheng — his too kind, his too patient San Lang — to have lived through and borne witness to Xie Lian's greatest and cruellest failures and still want to seek him out.

Hua Cheng had given him everything. And how had he repaid him? What horrible fate had he doomed Hua Cheng to in life? The second that thought came to his mind, it wasn't one from which he could turn away. It had him by the throat.

"San Lang, how did you *die* ?" If he was younger than Xie Lian but old enough to remember his ascension, then that meant he would have been around the right age to fight and die in the war. Or if not the war, then to the human face disease — could that even have been what had disfigured his eye? Many people had tried to mutilate themselves to free themselves of the disease after all, could it be a loss that had carried on after death? And if not that, then it could have been from the riots, or the starvation and the drought he hadn't been able to fix with the Rain Master's hat, or—

"I fought for Dianxia. I died on the battlefield." Xie Lian felt like he was drowning as he opened his mouth to say something, *anything* , to beg forgiveness, but Hua Cheng must have been able to read his mind because he pressed quickly on by saying, "It was my greatest honour, so please don't apologise to me. Never apologise. I meant what I said, Dianxia, knowing you has only ever brought me good fortune. Then and now. My only regret is that I couldn't do better, that I couldn't find you sooner, that I—"

He broke off, face twisting into something raw and painful, an emotion that Xie Lian couldn't hope to parse but, somehow, one he felt he understood perfectly. They were both staring

down the condeming weight of centuries.

Being told not to apologise, Xie Lian had nothing else he could possibly say to all that, so he simply reached out and clung to Hua Cheng. He threw his arms around his neck and pressed as close as he could, as if he could squeeze every drop of anguish and regret into Hua Cheng, as if that could fix the horrible role he had played in his death so many centuries ago. He didn't know how Hua Cheng could possibly want to see him out if not to take revenge. How he could want to do nothing but save and care for him. But it was not a gift he would ever dismiss as anything less than the monumental thing that it was.

To his relief, Hua Cheng held him back. His arms were wrapped around Xie Lian's back and had him held so close that the ring beneath Xie Lian's robes dug lightly into his chest. Somehow, it felt like a perfect mirror to Xie Lian's grip. As if Hua Cheng too felt he had something to repent for, something that would be impossible to put into words but could possibly be conveyed if only he held on tight enough.

He was Hua Cheng's god. He was Hua Cheng's *god* .

(*He was Hua Cheng's.*)

How could he have ever earned such a degree of trust? Such a degree of devotion? How could Hua Cheng have possibly seen him in such a state and still say he wanted to kneel for him as a worshipper to a god?

And not only that, but to intentionally resist his own desires because he knew his god had commanded against it. Even at the height of Xie Lian's power, he had failed to make his worshipers understand this. Yet here he was, eight hundred years later, sitting on Hua Cheng's lap, with Hua Cheng's head bowed against his own, and he felt more like a god being worshipped at an altar than he had at any other point in his long life.

How ridiculous.

How wonderful.

Somehow through all of it, he was still Xie Lian. Once a crown prince, once a martial god, once a curse intent on laying waste to an entire kingdom, once a scrap collector, once a toy kept in a dark hut. He was still Xie Lian in ever iteration, the good and the bad had the truly horrible. He was as much the Xie who Hua Cheng had saved from the Gambler's Den and whose filthy hair he had washed and with whom he sparred and played and slept. Hua Cheng had seen all of that, the before and the after, and still wished to be by his side.

And Hua Cheng was still Hua Cheng. There was simply more to him that Xie Lian had to learn. And that might hurt, but it would also be a pleasure. He wanted to know Hua Cheng in his entirety. He wanted to know about his childhood, not in abstractions but in the particulars. He wanted to know how he had possibly garnered such a faithful worshipper. He wanted to know what Hua Cheng had spent the past eight hundred years doing.

It was Hua Cheng who had taught Xie Lian to be terribly selfish again, and this was something he didn't want to deny himself.

How could he have thought that hut could make the slightest difference to either of them? How could one dirty hut possibly change anything after centuries?

"I'm sorry if I should have told you earlier, Dianxia," Hua Cheng said, and strangely Xie Lian found himself thinking of a very early conversation they'd had, back when Hua Cheng had still been pretending to be a servant in his own house. "I'm sorry if this changes things. Please tell me what you want from me, this humble worshipper only wants to help Dianxia…"

"You know, I truly do prefer gege…"

Hua Cheng's arms were suddenly around him all the tighter; it was in this moment that Xie Lian could truly appreciate having been a martial god because like this he could take the full force of Hua Cheng's hug and offer it back in turn.

"We don't need to move until you're ready, San Lang, but once you are, will you carry me back to the hut? I think I'm ready to get my hat."

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And so they approached the hut once more. This time, with Xie Lian wrapped securely in the arms of his last and most devout worshipper. He did feel a little silly, perhaps, because there would never be anything easy about carrying a man as tall as Xie Lian, but somehow feeling silly also felt right. He had felt many things while in that hut, but never silly, never like he had to swallow a laugh. And never like something precious, like something that should be held and cared for and adored. He let his head fall comfortably against Hua Cheng's shoulder.

This time there were people hanging around. This wasn't a big village, so of course word had spread. One of the locals had disappeared, only now, months later, for his house to be invaded by strangers, strangers who had left in some haste with one having a crying fit. It was only natural that they were now peering at the door which had been left open, and at the strangers who were once again returning — and such a sight too, with one in the arms of the other. No one dared say a thing to them though.

And that was okay. They were just people. What they knew or didn't know, did or didn't do, none of that affected Xie Lian in this moment. He was exactly where he wanted to be. He was in the only place he could be right now.

"If gege wants to leave, he only needs to say," Hua Cheng whispered into his hair, completely indifferent to the mortals around them.

Xie Lian nodded and pressed closer to Hua Cheng's chest. Perhaps it wouldn't be the end of the world if he didn't find that hat again, but still, it would be nice.

Once they were inside the hut, it was actually an easy thing to find. There wasn't much space to look. It had been wedged under a dresser, out of the way and in a sorry state. Its point was crushed, and an entire side of it was mostly hole, its bamboo strands crushed beyond salvation.

“I’m sorry, gege,” said Hua Cheng when he had knelt down for Xie Lian to pick it up.

Still nestled against Hua Cheng, Xie Lian turned it over in his hands. “Oh, it’s not that bad.” It really wasn’t. He felt quite cheerful about it.

“Gege said it was quite old?”

“Very. Not much younger than us, truth told! And there certainly isn’t a single part of it that’s original. Is that ridiculous? It’s really an entirely new hat, and yet somehow it isn’t. No matter what state I manage to get it into, it remains my hat. Even when my luck is at its worst, I’ve always managed to keep a hold of it, or at least find it again afterwards. I’ve fixed it up from much worse states that this. Perhaps San Lang can help me this time, if we have a boring afternoon that needs filling.”

“Gege will have to teach me, I’ve never woven a bamboo hat.”

“There’s really nothing to it. Getting in the first place was much harder, honestly; once you have it, it’s really not so hard to fix it up again. Shall we go home and I’ll show you?”

So they left. Xie Lian holding his hat and his walking stick, and Hua Cheng holding his god. With a roll of his dice, the hut’s door, the uttermost edge of Xie Lian’s world for so long, opened to Paradise Manor and Xie Lian knew with a light-heart he would never again return there.

In Hua Cheng’s arms, it was an effortless step to move from one to the other, even if it had been a step long in coming.

And then they were home.

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EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

A fun little post-fic peak into how this fic might merge back into canon, and to answer some of the questions I've seen bandied about in the comment section (. ‘ ᴗ ‘.)

I can't believe I'm at the end of this story, it feels like I've been working on it for ages... now that this and my current MDZS fic are both finished, I'm actually left with no big, active fics and I'm feeling a little bereft! Anyway, thank you everyone who's been reading this story, especially those who have been leaving comments and speculations and encouragement along the way! Between a bit of a heavy plot and pretty hefty wordcounts per chapter it was a heck of a story to work on and all that really gave me the boost to keep going! I had a lot of fun with this story and with you guys! Cheers!

Xie Lian stood and surveyed the garden with satisfaction. The gardens of Paradise Manor were truly something unrivalled by anywhere else in the world — and Xie Lian had travelled enough over the centuries that he truly felt confident in saying so.

They meandered around hillocks and lotus ponds and ancient trees with the tenderness of an embrace. Each bench and pavilion had been placed with the greatest consideration to the feng shui and to give anyone that might use them a perfect view of a breath-taking assortment of flowers, both exotic and mundane. It was designed by someone who clearly loved flowers, which, Xie Lian supposed, befitted Hua Cheng’s name.

Xie Lian had always appreciated flowers. As a prince of Xianle, a kingdom that valued fine things, he had been enchanted by the beauty that nature itself designed. That appreciation had only grown as he had ascended to godhood and then crashed back down. He had come to appreciate the simplicity of flowers, how they bloomed just as beautifully for the rich as the poor, and the gentle memories that he had come to associate with them.

(Porcelain shard memories were not always bad. They frequently hurt to grip, but a vase could not be put back together unless one was willing to take that risk. The memory of a white flower in a divine statue’s hand was not a memory he would risk losing, not when it so perfectly fit alongside every new memory he now had of Hua Cheng bringing him flowers.)

Lately he had been working in the gardens. He was no great gardener like Hua Cheng was, having never had time or inclination to learn, but now he found himself to be a willing student. He enjoyed getting to hear Hua Cheng talk at length about the things he loved, and this was letting Xie Lian exercise both his body and his senses in a pleasant, undemanding way.

Admittedly a vegetable patch was, perhaps, an odd thing to add to such a treasure, but the beans were coming up nicely and Xie Lian was already excited about what he could cook with them.

Wiping his palms on his robes, Xie Lian stood and braced himself against his walking stick and a garden statue while he patiently waited for the vertigo to pass. Because his balance was still poor, and his senses were still occasionally overwhelmed. He wasn't sure how long that would take to heal entirely, having never had his brain damaged in such a significant way before, but little by little it was getting better. He could spend the whole day in Ghost City now and so long as he was careful he would have no greater consequence than some exhaustion that was easily cured by curling up in bed with Hua Cheng. There was no rushing this sort of thing, and he no longer felt like he had to.

He had all the time in the world after all. He had his hat back, which kept the sunlight from stabbing migraines into his eyes and helped block off part of the world, keeping part of the sights and sounds hidden until he was ready to face them. He had his walking stick, a generous gift and an important reminder, to give him the strength and independence to pursue the pleasant things in life. And of course Hua Cheng was rarely far away on the days when his balance or nausea or nightmares were worse than others.

Sure enough, he had hardly stood before he found a cool palm beneath the hand that had previously been pressed against the statue. Sometimes he couldn't help but think that Hua Cheng got jealous of anything he touched that wasn't him. The thought of Hua Cheng growing jealous of his own garden statue made Xie Lian chuckle.

"Why do I feel that gege is teasing me?" Hua Cheng sighed.

"Would I ever tease my San Lang?" Xie Lian asked, tipping his hat back so Hua Cheng could better see the mischief in his eyes. Rather than even trying to look put-upon, Hua Cheng just smiled at being given a better view of Xie Lian's face, which immediately made Xie Lian want to pull the hat back down to hide his reddening cheeks.

Instead of responding though, Hua Cheng just lifted the hand he was already holding and pressed his cool lips to the back of it, so that spiritual energy sparked through him, hot and bright and quelling the faint headache he had barely noticed stirring at the base of his skull.

It wasn't only his meridians that felt heated though. He felt like lightning had been delicately traced up his spine and he had to resist the urge to shiver as Hua Cheng lifted his head. He had to resist the urge to demand Hua Cheng not break that hot, bright point of contact so quickly. Or better yet, find a new point of contact.

It had been Xie Lian who, so long ago, had remarked that surely lip-to-lip energy transfer would be more efficient, and it seemed he had only doomed himself by that careless comment because he could no longer stop thinking about it. Actually, most of the time he wasn't thinking about spiritual energy in any capacity when those thoughts rose unbidden to his mind — rather it was only the soft press of Hua Cheng's lips, the ghosting of his breath, the way his body arched down to meet him…

What would it be like for Hua Cheng to not hold his hand, to not brush his lips against his fingers but to gently hold his face like something precious and brush his lips to…?

"Has gege been in the sun too long? You're looking very red," Hua Cheng remarked, but no matter how hard Xie Lian stared at him he couldn't see any hint that Huan Cheng was teasing him. For the world he seemed to be entirely sincere in asking that. Xie Lian wanted to groan. He wanted, desperately, for Hua Cheng to never guess what was plaguing his mind. And conversely, he desperately wanted Hua Cheng to know so that he might make this thought a reality, as he seemed to do with every one of Xie Lian's idle whims.

The problem was Xie Lian suspected that even if Hua Cheng could guess at his feelings that he would hesitate to initiate. Many things he did without the slightest prompting, simply because he anticipated that Xie Lian might like it. But there were other things, especially anything regarding intimacy, that Hua Cheng shied away from without a very explicit request from Xie Lian. It was Xie Lian who had first taken his arm, who had first coaxed him into his bed, and, he feared, the one who would have to first suggest this too, if he truly wanted it.

(And there too was a problem: he had spent more than one night tied up in knots over whether this was something he wanted. Could want. He cultivation hardly stopped it anymore and yet. He wanted to kiss Hua Cheng. He wanted to be kissed by Hua Cheng. He wanted to hold and be held, wanted to be wrapped up and protected and cherished. And yet what came next? Xie Lian didn't know.)

(He knew too well.)

Sometimes he thought there was nothing he wanted more. Sometimes he couldn't think of anything that disgusted him more.

The rest of the time it hardly seemed to matter one way or another, not when what he really wanted to do was lie in their bed and curl around each other and learn what it meant to kiss Hua Cheng. Whether or not he ever had any interest in what might come next, surely it was enough to simply kiss in the way they did all things together: slow and thorough and with the contented languor of people who had all the time in the world to explore a new interest.

Could it hurt to ask? Out of all the horrible things Xie Lian had confessed to Hua Cheng, this was surely one of the most innocuous. To ask for a kiss. Just to see what it was like. To try it. Like they had tried sparring with staves together. Like they had tried drinking together until they were both ridiculous puddles on the floor of Xie Lian's room. Good or bad, worth repeating or not, did it hurt to try?

" *San Lang, will you kiss me?* " It would be easy to ask. Out here like this, with Hua Cheng's qi below his skin and the sun on his back and dirt beneath his nails and the taste of fresh, raw green beans in his mouth, it felt natural, perfect.

And yet it wasn't. Not quite yet. Not with one lingering shadow that sometimes stretched across Xie Lian's mind, twisting any of his more pleasant fantasies into something ugly and vulgar and sickening. And while he knew that was not a wound that could heal overnight, he also knew that it was time to lance it, let it bleed clean.

"Are you finished in the garden?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Hm, not yet, but I think I just want to sit and rest for a few minutes." He had been moving up and down a lot, tending to weeds and lines of plants, and even with Hua Cheng's qi he could feel the first, faint whispers of the exertion beginning to affect him. If he rested now it would disappear in less than a kè and trouble him no more.

"As long as you're here though, there's something I've been thinking about," he added as they walked arm in arm towards a stone bench by a pleasantly burbling stream.

"Oh?" said Hua Cheng,

"Yes. I was wondering if that man is still alive."

The words came much easier now. It still wasn't *easy* , exactly, and some days were better than others when it came to thinking about those memories, but it was easier. And that was something.

That was a lot.

Hua Cheng's face darkened. They had never directly addressed this; Xie Lian had never pressed, had never wanted to, and Hua Cheng had never admitted to anything. But Xie Lian knew he wouldn't lie. He was content with whatever answer he got.

"He is."

Xie Lian nodded, considering the way it made his stomach twist and fear roll up his spine. He could acknowledge that those reactions were both unnecessary — that his circumstances now were very different — but that they were there nonetheless. He felt Ruoye nudge his wrist comfortingly from beneath his robes.

"I think it's time to let him go."

Hua Cheng's frown deepened, but he said nothing.

"I don't think he belongs here," continued Xie Lian, as he leaned against Hua Cheng and fidgeted idly with the ring around his neck, its surface smooth and cool between his fingers. "I'm happy here. I don't think something like that belongs in a place where I'm happy. Is that selfish?"

"Never," said Hua Cheng immediately. "But if gege just wants that filth gone, there's other ways to do it. I can make sure he never comes near gege, or anyone, ever again."

"Am I right in thinking that San Lang's hospitality has made it improbable that he could ever attempt something like this again?"

Hua Cheng made a dark, satisfied noise somewhere deep in his throat. It was not a kind smile on his face, but Xie Lian found himself comforted regardless.

"I don't need him here anymore," said Xie Lian. Because somehow, he thought he may have needed him here before. After all, he had never actually told Hua Cheng to get rid of him, despite knowing that it was likely that the Ghost King was detaining him somewhere nearby. He could have. But he hadn't. There was something to be said for knowing that your greatest nightmare was contained somewhere dark and impenetrable and near at hand. But that was the blood on the edges of his porcelain shard memories, and it was no longer comforting to stare at that blood and remind himself of the dangers. He was trying to wipe them clean so he could repair it.

"So gege wants me to just release him?" Hua Cheng asked, not sounding happy about this at all.

Xie Lian considered that.

"He also hurt San Lang. I know what I want, but San Lang also deserves what he wants. I won't tell San Lan how to conduct his affairs. I would like him gone, you may choose how you wish to go about that."

"Gege is very generous to this San Lang."

Xie Lian smiled up at him. That was his San Lang. Never pushing, never insisting that Xie Lian should give more than he wanted, or feel differently than he did. Anything that Xie Lian offered him, he loved and respected and held as a gift. In this moment it didn't feel like a single thing in this world mattered other than this happiness, especially knowing that the dark spot somewhere beneath their feet would soon be removed entirely. He leaned closer, content and safe and entirely too affectionate. It felt like every good thing was simply too big to contain and would burst right out of his chest.

It never hurt to ask. Hua Cheng had never, and would never, make him feel less for what he was feeling, no matter how complicated those feelings could get.

"San Lang—" he started, but did not get a chance to finish because the world exploded in white.

-

Feng Xin was not in a good mood.

That could be reasonably assumed because he was currently sitting in Mu Qing's palace with a disagreeable cup of tea in front of him, and an even more disagreeable Mu Qing across from that.

"This is oversteeped," Feng Xin said, in lieu of anything else.

"That's how it's supposed to be brewed," Mu Qing snapped, as he did every single time for the past eight hundred years that Feng Xin had brought this up (less than you would expect, they rarely tolerated each other's company long enough to share tea). "You just have no taste."

"It's practically burnt."

"If you're just here for a fight get the fuck out, unlike you I have things I could be doing!"

Feng Xin sat and stewed (like the tea leaves) but didn't get up. He took a sip of the tea. Across from him Mu Qing did the same, expression just as irate. Somewhere to the side a very nervous Middle Court Official who was responsible for the tea service was shifting and likely praying without hope that things would go smoothly while he was waiting on the Generals.

Mostly Feng Xin and Mu Qing managed to survive sharing the south by actively avoiding one another unless strictly necessary. Unfortunately, it had recently become upsettingly necessary, and the nature of that necessity had them both on edge. Anything that involved Crimson Rain Sought Flower was liable to do that.

(Anything that involved Xie Lian was liable to do that.)

Feng Xin hadn't heard a peep about Xie Lian in centuries. Even the days when stories about the Banished Crown Prince might still crop up were long gone, forgotten by the turn of years, replaced by new gods and new stories. (Replaced by a lot of new gods, if you considered the killing spree Crimson Rain Sought Flower had gone on.) Xie Lian was presumably still alive, by the virtue of his banishment, but Feng Xin knew no more than that. (He definitely didn't try to learn more. The name of his former prince — his former friend — definitely did not still trouble him.)

And then, suddenly, a new rumour. For the first time in centuries. He hadn't even been listening for it.

A lie, surely. Feng Xin had heard it entirely by chance, when he had been dealing with a haunting in his territory. A group of ghosts were doing some sort of business along a trade road on moonlit nights, luring lonely, desperate mortals into grim deals. The ghost merchants chattered and gossiped amongst each other while they waited for mortal prey; Feng Xin hadn't paid their idle gossip much mind when he had first been staking out the area. Not until suddenly he did.

An undying cultivator in white, was what the ghosts had been talking about.

(That could be anyone. White was common for cultivators, and a cultivator could be strong and hardy without actually being immortal, the layman couldn't always be trusted to know the difference.)

An undying cultivator in white had been gambled away in the infamous Gambler's Den of Ghost City, won as a prize by the nefarious Hua Cheng himself. Apparently he tortured the cultivator for fun and let him be reborn anew, to satisfy his wicked urges — so claimed a ghost who swore up and down that he had a friend who had heard the screams herself.

(It could be anyone. It might not even be true, crazed rumours flocked around that Ghost King like those evil butterflies of his.)

(But the problem was, it *could* be anyone.)

Feng Xin had dispersed the ghosts and immediately gone to Mu Qing.

He and Mu Qing had then gotten into a brawl that had toppled a boulevard of divine statues because Mu Qing had mocked him for not having the sense of keeping a ghost alive for questioning and Feng Xin had been piqued at having his actions judged so carelessly — Mu Qing hadn't been there, he couldn't understand what such an unexpected rumour had done to him! Ultimately though they had both agreed there could be no substance to that rumour. There were as many rumours about the misdealings of Hua Cheng's gambling hall as there were ghosts who frequented it. It was certainly nothing, and even if it was something an undying cultivator in white could be anyone.

(It could be anyone.)

The next time he and Mu Qing had met they had also gotten into a fight because they had both run into each other in disguise, attempting to snoop around the edges of Ghost City. That had gotten them quickly evicted and they had continued their fight out of general annoyance at the other ruining their plan. So they had gone their separate ways to investigate ghost realm rumours in their own territories, agreeing to meet in a fortnight.

Finding any sort of rumour had been shockingly hard. Ghosts either truly did not know anything, or were being tight-lipped about it, or else it seemed mixed up with the myriad of other rumours. Oh, did they mean the troupe of beautiful dancing women that Hua Cheng had allegedly won and kept like living statues? Oh did they mean the murderous ghosts that Hua Cheng allegedly kept on leashes like dogs and released on his enemies? Oh, did you mean the entire cultivator sect that tried to attack Ghost City and had been wiped out on the spot?

It was a waste of time. It could be anyone. It might not even be true. And if it wasn't true and if it was anyone then surely it was the affair of ghosts and not that of two busy gods.

(But it could be anyone.)

(The ghost had said that Hua Cheng would torture him for fun, and wait for the cultivator's undying body to mend itself.)

Mu Qing had been the one to actually learn more information and that still irked Feng Xin. He had picked away at a thread of rumours that had finally led him to the house of a wealthy silk merchant who was said to have gambled with ghosts to grow his fortune. His neighbours seemed to eye him with distrust and the ghost that had shared the information had spat after speaking his name. Mu Qing had the tact of a sledgehammer in Feng Xin's opinion but had apparently managed to draw the man's secrets out of him by plying him with drink, Mu Qing himself being well used to making it look like he was drinking while he wasn't. Did he know a white-robed cultivator who was said to be unkillable? One who was won by Crimson Rain Sought Flower?

Not only did he know who he was talking about, he had been at the very table.

The story the merchant had shared, if it was true and not the work of drunken exaggeration, was chilling.

(It could be anyone.)

(Anyone who was described as having the same sort of hair as Xie Lian, with the same ubiquitous silk band, with the same lousy luck…)

The undying cultivator had filthy and beaten. He had been gambled against Hua Cheng, who had naturally won. According to the merchant, Hua Cheng had then had the gambler dragged away and had cleared the room to make use of his new prize in peace. He had apparently said more about the cultivator, but Mu Qing refused to go into detail. Feng Xing would normally press, except the horror and outrage on Mu Qing's face somehow stilled his tongue. Something twisted in his stomach and told him didn't want to know.

There had been no word of anyone seeing the cultivator since. Mu Qing and Feng Xin could corroborate that at least, since this was the most information they could find.

It wasn't much to go on. It could be anyone.

Except Crimson Rain Sought Flower had some sort of strange grudge against the two of them. Neither had so much as spoken to Xie Lian since their parting of ways some eight centuries ago, but their histories together weren't exactly a secret — if anything, it was integral to both of their ascension stories. Surely Hua Cheng wouldn't intentionally seek out Xie Lian just to act on some vendetta he had against them, would he? That would be too far, too much, even for a ghost, surely?

Surely it was, they had told each other. That cultivator could have been anyone, and surely Hua Cheng would have never drawn any sort of connection between them. Surely.

And yet they had both approached Ghost City once more, this time united in purpose.

They hadn't lasted much longer that time, though instead of being ousted by annoyed ghosts Crimson Rain himself had descended on them, demon sword as malevolent as it ever was. Even in the fight they had done their best to ascertain if anything was different, if the rumours could be true, if Hua Cheng realised what he may or may not possess. Yet his temper was no different than it ever was — acerbic and cruel, but giving no hint that he had some sort of leverage over them. They had simply fought until he and Mu Qin had beat a tactical retreat.

Surely if there was any grounds to these rumours, he would have said something. Rubbed it in their faces. Gloated. It wasn't like Crimson Rain was subtle. Surely.

And yet here Feng Xin sat, drinking Mu Qing's lousy tea and still dwelling on matters.

"If we could just find him somewhere else…" Mu Qing was saying. "Then we'd know this is all bullshit."

"No one's caught a glimpse of him in eight hundred years, why would now be any different?" Feng Xin demanded.

"Well it's not like we were looking before."

Feng Xin had to drink more shitty tea to keep from snarling. He hated Mu Qing's tone. So dismissive. Maybe *he* hadn't been looking, maybe *he* didn't care, he had made his feelings perfectly clear centuries ago, but that didn't mean—! Not to say Feng Xin had been looking, per se, but he had at least kept his ears open. He had thought about him. He cared.

"If that's how you feel then you can just go back to your prayers and I'll look into it," said Feng Xin, aware he was unable to keep the resentment from his voice.

"Oh and you think you'll do such a good job?"

"Better than you!"

"Then what the fuck are you doing wasting my time?" Mu Qing snapped. "Go back to your own palace and get out of my face!"

Feng Xin knew that this was yet another failed meeting, just like every one they had tried to have since being chased out of Ghost City liked beaten dogs, but he just couldn't manage to modulate his temper.

"I will then!" he said, standing up sharply. "I've wasted enough time trying to talk sense into you! I'll look into things myself! And I'll have some proper tea while I do it!"

Mu Qing was already surging to his own feet — tea cup in hand, looking like he was preparing to launch it at Feng Xin's head while the Middle Court Official scurried for cover — but he didn't get a chance to offer a rebuttal before the floor suddenly surged beneath their feet.

"My lords!" the poor Middle Court Official cried, clearly thinking it was the gods' wrath causing the tremors. But as the tolling of a bell filled the sky and the tremors continued and worsened, forcing even two ancient martial gods like Mu Qing and Feng Xin to lurch towards the walls for something to hold, it was very clear that this was neither of their doing.

This was an ascension.

And a truly unparalleled one at that, Feng Xin thought with some dismay as he watched his own palace crumble in the distance from one of Mu Qing's windows. So much for drinking his own tea.

-

Xie Lian lay still on the ground, eyes squeezed shut, because he knew exactly what sort of pain to expect the moment he opened them. It felt like a bell was thundering his head, his headache immediate and thunderous, and if he opened his eyes everything would certainly be swimming.

Whatever had just happened, he would prefer not to throw up.

He was vaguely aware of voices above him, but it was hard to make sense of them past the pain and the ringing.

Actually, the ringing wasn't just in his head. It was a bell. Or it had been a bell, until there was suddenly a resounding *CLANG* that suggested that whatever bell had been ringing, it had managed to ring itself straight to the ground.

Xie Lian could sympathise as he pressed himself more firmly against the ground and his head *clang-clang-clanged* in a screaming rhythm.

(He hadn't had an attack this bad in weeks — what in the world had happened? And why was he alone? Why was there no cool, stable hand touching his back yet, guiding and supporting and helping? Why did he feel like he was curling up on tiles beneath a table while people spoke and rolled dice above his head?)

(Where was San Lang? *Where was San Lang?*)

(And where was he?)

Finding no other way around it, he carefully opened an eye and saw such a bright blue sky above him that it made his eyes water in pain and he immediately reached up to pull his hat more firmly down over his eyes. Before he did so he vaguely caught sight of faces peering down at him but none of them were his San Lang and that was what really mattered. If Hua Cheng had been here with him, then he certainly wouldn't be on the ground any longer. He would have been pulled into a comfortable lap to recover.

In fact, he wasn't in the gardens of Paradise Manor at all. He knew that without a doubt, he knew the feel of the manor, the smell, the sounds — which certainly didn't involve any bells or staring faces. He wasn't even in the Ghost City. If anything, he seemed to be in a crater.

And then a dark shadow loomed over him. And a hot hand touched his arm.

His reaction was immediate and visceral. He yanked his arm back and jerked as far away as his prone position would allow, eyes immediately flying open in terror.

Someone alive, someone with hot, living hands, had grabbed him. He was on the ground and in pain and alone and someone *was grabbing him* —

"Please don't throw me again."

Xie Lian sat frozen, just trying to breathe past the swell of panic (*past the nail*) as he strained to make sense of the world around him.

The voices overhead had gotten louder, but what mattered was the voice in front of him. Someone had slid down into his crater with him. It was an unfamiliar man in dark robes — this did not do a lot to quell Xie Lian's terror, not when he was already in a state like this, but it could be worse.

(It could be a mortal labourer with a hammer and a nail.)

The other man made no effort to step closer to him though, if anything he had moved away after Xie Lian's violent reaction. He just stood there and stared at him with plain, dark eyes. And then, right before him, the eyes changed. Suddenly it wasn't a normal pair of human eyes but something deeper, darker, a spark gleaming from an untold depth…

Those were familiar eyes even as they returned to their previous state.

"Ming-xiong! Who is it? Who's ascended?"

He Xuan stared at him from a stranger's face and held out a hand.

This time, when Xie Lian took it, the hand was cold and dead to the touch. Not as good as Hua Cheng's hands, but familiar again even if the shape was new. Dazedly, Xie Lian let himself be pulled upright. He Xuan stood there, waiting for Xie Lian to find his balance before helping him out of the crater. The crater that he had made. With a third ascension.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Looking around, Xie Lian kept his hat pulled low to try to mitigate the throbbing headache. It helped to cut out the burning sun, the overwhelming crowds, and glamour of the space he now occupied. Palaces clustered the street, and everything gleamed with fine gold and jewels, everything clamouring for attention. The Upper Court had always been like that. He hadn't realised how little he had missed it until he compared it to the gentle cream sheets and faint waft of flowers that made up his room in Paradise Manor.

His walking stick was likely somewhere back in the gardens, so he let himself lean against He Xuan and closed his eyes. He Xuan was used to him by now, and he didn't have the energy to feel self-conscious, even though he was beginning to identify the noise around him as the voices of gawking gods. He already felt exhausted by it all. He wondered how quickly he could get banished this time and get back to his nice, soft bed in his nice, dark room with his nice, cool Ghost King.

All around him were exclamations as people caught sight of him and some began to recognize him. And then the yelling really took off.

"Are you really the Crown Prince of Xianle?" someone asked, and suddenly a new face was filling Xie Lian's vision, peering at him from beneath the brim of his hat.

Whoever this energetic god was she wasn't one that Xie Lian had met before, but her tone at least seemed more good-natured than some of the other voices that were crying out about the Laughingstock ascending once again and the mess he had caused on the way up.

"...Yes. I'm sorry, who are you? It's been a while since I've met any gods…" That and he was having a hard time even thinking about what he should be doing next, never mind remembering faces from centuries ago.

"Sorry, sorry, how rude of me! You don't recognize me from my temples? Maybe you'd know my male form. I'm Shi Qingxuan, the Wind Master!" She said this with a flourish, snapping her fan open and showing off its inscription.

Xie Lian didn't have the heart to say he really had never heard of the new Wind Master or that he didn't bother visiting any temple other than to occasionally get out of the rain, so he chose to just smile and say nothing at all. This didn't seem to deter the Wind Master, who continued to chatter happily.

"How do you know Ming-xiong? He's not normally very friendly with anyone, you must be special!"

"Ah…" said Xie Lian.

Spy , Hua Cheng had said. Somehow Xie Lian suspected that mentioning that he and "Ming-xiong" frequently dined together in Crimson Rain Sought Flower's domain was probably not a good choice.

"I ran across him when I was dealing with things in the mortal realm," lied He Xuan blandly. "He's not special, he just doesn't talk as much as you."

"Ming-xiong, so mean!"

He Xuan looked away from Shi Qingxuan's dramatics to glance at Xie Lian and added, "A mutual friend wants to know why you haven't been in contact lately."

"A *mutual friend* ? Ming-xiong, you've been holding out on me! Who else do you know?"

Xie Lian was also confused by this statement, until realisation struck. Hua Cheng! He must be beside himself! With his head already feeling so muddled and sore he really hadn't noticed the faint presence at the back of his mind that indicated that someone was trying to contact his personal array.

Gege! came Hua Cheng's voice as soon as he allowed the connection. *Are you alright?*

Yes, yes, I'm fine, I've just ascended again.

Naturally , said Hua Cheng who seemed rather smug about it. *But does gege want me to come and fetch him?*

Come and fetch him? Xie Lian had to swallow laughter at the thought, because he had no doubt that Hua Cheng would. Based on all the stories Xie Lian had heard about Crimson Rain Sought Flower, he couldn't imagine that Hua Cheng turning up in the middle of the Grand Boulevard would go over well. No matter how desperately he wanted Hua Cheng next to him, he really wasn't sure he had the energy to deal with the repercussions of that. Probably easier to just let things play out naturally.

Don't worry about it, I'll come down soon. I've run into He Xuan, he's giving me a hand... Xie Lian had a suspicion that Hua Cheng had something to do with that. *...So, when you mentioned that he was a spy...?*

Playing at being the Earth Master, Ming Yi, Hua Cheng said, amusement clear in his voice. *He's undercover, so try not to give him away. Or do, if he annoys you.*

Xie Lian was not about to sort through all that right now, not when he had what felt like the entire Upper Court yelling around him and a headache worse than he'd had in weeks ringing in his head. He would have to ask He Xuan about it the next time he was over for tea.

For the time being, his name was being called by a rather exasperated looking civil god, who was marching forward with a severe expression.

"Ah, here comes Ling Wen," said Shi Qingxuan. "I bet she's been having Officials complain to her about all the tremors and the bell and the palace and everything. She's sure to be in a bad mood."

"What bell? What palace?" asked Xie Lian, who really wasn't keeping up.

Shi Qingxuan waved her fan dismissively, looking cheerful about the whole thing. "Don't worry about it, don't worry about it. It was all amusing, so it hardly matters. My brother is good friends with her, so I'm sure I can get him to talk her into giving you a break."

Xie Lian was tempted to ask what sort of break he might need — because he wasn't the sort to ever get a break — but Ling Wen was already there and beginning to tell Xie Lian all about his new debt.

What a day. And it just kept going. It was almost a relief when the summons came to approach the Palace of Divine Might. It gave him an excuse to step away from Ling Wen, who promised to see to things the best she could and connect him to the communal array again. From there the crowd only seemed to grow. He may as well be a filthy, bloody pile of desecrated robes at the gambling hall dais again, for all the attention he was attracting. It wasn't like he was new or exciting, and it wasn't like he would be here long so he couldn't see what the fuss was all about.

He Xuan didn't even bother asking if Xie Lian wanted him to come with him to the Palace of Divine Might, and Xie Lian was grateful for that. Lately Xie Lian had been having more good days than bad, but he still rarely went anywhere without his walking stick — or Hua Cheng. If he tried to walk along the wide open, sprawling boulevard to the Palace of Divine Might on his own he would certainly collapse within a few steps.

Having He Xuan at his side also gave him an excuse to turn his head, the wide brim of his hat blocking his vision so he could pretend he didn't see the one particular pair of faces staring at him with the rest of the crowd. So Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both in the Upper Court right now. At a glance they seemed well. He was glad, he would enjoy hearing about how godhood was treating them. However he was also grateful not to have to speak to them, not right now. They were both certainly used to seeing him weak and pathetic, but he wasn't sure he could handle seeing his current state reflected in their eyes right now.

"I'll come too," Shi Qingxuan declared, inviting herself along carelessly. The gesture was likely more out of loyalty to "Ming Yi" or possibly for the sake of the entertainment, but Xie

Lian found she was rather pleasant company, at least compared to most of the other Heavenly Officials he had seen today.

When she reached for Xie Lian's other arm though — almost certainly a gesture meant to be helpful and friendly, mimicking the posture of He Xuan on his other side — He Xuan stopped walking and stared at her.

"Don't touch without asking, you aren't a child."

Shi Qingxuan froze, hand hovering above Xie Lian's robes. He hadn't flinched away, but it was only because he had seen her intentions and had forcefully stilled himself in preparation. He could practically feel the heat radiating from her.

"Sorry," she said, quickly tucking her hands in her sleeves. She looked sincere, if confused.

"It's alright," Xie Lian said quickly.

"It's not," He Xuan said dryly as they began walking once more. "Trust me. I made that mistake, and got thrown through a door for my trouble. That's how I learnt he was a banished martial god."

Shi Qingxuan stared and then burst into laughter, the awkwardness immediately dissolving. Xie Lian found himself chuckling despite himself, mostly because the description was entirely accurate while also, somehow, creating a perfect lie to explain how the Earth Master Ming Yi came to meet the Twice-Banished Laughingstock.

"Then I'll just have to hold Ming-xiong's hand instead," Shi Qingxuan said, skipping over to He Xuan's other side and looping her arms around his free arm.

He Xuan huffed unhappily but did not attempt to dislodge the Wind Master. They certainly made quite a sight, parading towards the palace like this but it could have been so much worse. He could have been alone. By the time they stepped out of the glaring sun (the glaring eyes) and onto the echoing tiles of the Palace of Divine Might, Xie Lian was actually feeling somewhat heartened. He would be able to handle this, and then go home, and it would be nothing but an amusing anecdote for him and Hua Cheng to laugh about.

"Xianle, I see you've returned."

Jun Wu's voice was warm and pleasant, so at least that was one thing that hadn't changed. Given the nature of his second banishment, Xie Lian hadn't been sure how he would be received, but the Heavenly Emperor seemed pleased enough to see him as he entered the Palace of Divine Might. Indeed, as he stepped forward he reached out an affectionate hand to tilt Xie Lian's hat back, to better see him as he smiled down at him.

Xie Lian smiled back, feeling somewhat awkward about the whole thing even in the light of the Emperor's good humour. The feeling of his hat dropping lightly against his back, string pressing inoffensively against his neck, sent a prickle up his skin that he ignored.

Glancing over at He Xuan, Jun Wu added, "Earth Master, it's uncommon to see you here."

"We're just helping out," said Shi Qingxuan breezily.

When He Xuan spoke, it was somewhat stilted and appropriately deferential, "His Highness has been unwell."

Jun Wu's eyes lingered at the place where Xie Lian's arms were looped around He Xuan's elbow. "How generous of you. You may go now, I will see to Xianle's well-being from here. I wish to speak with him about resolving this issue of merits…"

He Xuan's arm hesitated only a moment before withdrawing, giving Xie Lian time to ensure he had his own balance before he was suddenly standing on his own in the cavernous hall. The Earth Master and Wind Master both bowed to the Emperor and nodded to Xie Lian before finally moving away. As He Xuan stepped back, Jun Wu reached out to take his place, tucking Xie Lian's arm firmly against his own.

It was very considerate. He had seen how Xie Lian was in need of assistance. It was fine, of course, because of all the people for Xie Lian to be with, Jun Wu was a reliable one. Safe.

This is what his sensible brain thought, at least. As he had learnt, rational thought did not always overrule irrational fear, especially not when Xie Lian was already in a disoriented state. Though it really didn't account for the way Xie Lian's skin crawled when he felt Jun Wu's hand grab him and maneuver him. It didn't hurt! It was nothing but gentle and kind! Even more so than He Xuan often was, really! Certainly the unease was just because Jun Wu's hands were so hot, whereas He Xuan had let his body temperature drop back down when he'd realised Xie Lian's discomfort.

"You'll be fine sitting on your own?" Jun Wu asked indulgently, to which Xie Lian nodded.

"Of course, it's really not that bad. My ascension just made me a bit dizzy, I'm afraid."

Jun Wu acknowledged this with a nod, and began to lead Xie Lian across the hall. When they reached the head of the room though, Jun Wu didn't immediately let go, not immediately at least. He released Xie Lian's arms from his own, but he kept a hold of his hands. Xie Lian blinked up at him, not sure what to make of this strange behaviour.

"I am glad to hear you are not badly hurt. Later, when we have more time, you will have to tell me what exactly happened to injure you in such a way." One of Jun Wu's thumbs caressed the back of Xie Lian's hands. He leaned closer, like he was whispering a secret, hot breath brushing against Xie Lian's ear.

Xie Lian's mouth was unaccountably dry. It was funny, he hadn't been feeling thirsty before, but now he was entirely parched. And wasn't that a strange thing to be thinking about right now? Except that must be why he was feeling so strange, like he wasn't quite fitting in his body properly — he knew Jun Wun was still holding his hands, his thumb still tracing the back of one hand, but he couldn't quite feel it? He was too distracted by his dry mouth. And from the way the beads of Jun Wu's hair piece moved.

"Do you know," Jun Wu said, voice low and warm against his ear, "that you are quite covered in ghost qi, Xianle?" His thumb stroked his hand again, the very place Hua Cheng's lips had

been… could it have really been less than a sichen ago? "You will have to give me a full account, because of course if a ghost was tormenting you, you know I would move to eliminate it for you."

Xie Lian swallowed. His mouth really was too dry. "Yes."

Jun Wu pulled back fully, expression one of gentle concern. He gave Xie Lian's hand a final pat before stepping back to sit on his throne. Xie Lian wasn't entirely aware of sinking to his own knees, only that suddenly cool tile was beneath him and he felt grateful for their cool stability beneath his knees. Again, Xie Lian suppressed the prickle down his spine. He had developed bad associations with people watching him from above, and had grown too used to Hua Cheng ensuring they were always at the same level. Of course he felt unsettled, being on his own after growing so dependent on his San Lang, really this was probably a good step back into the real world beyond the sheltering walls of Paradise Manor.

"Now, Xianle, about your debt. I realise without temples there is really no way for you to earn those merits, so I thought you may appreciate a job you could take care of in my territory… of course whatever merits it earns will be entirely your own…"

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Which was how, in a nutshell, Xie Lian had ended up here in this teashop. Really, Jun Wu's offer had been too generous. It was obvious he was just doing Xie Lian a favour while pretending it was Xie Lian who was helping *him* .

One way or another, as he explained to Hua Cheng over the array, he really would prefer to leave the Heavenly Capital without any debts if he could manage it. Owing people — especially considering whose palace he had destroyed — would only be more trouble in the long run.

So he had intended to descend quickly and try to sort out the matter as efficiently as possible. He hadn't expected both He Xuan and Shi Qingxuan to descend with him. Xie Lian had a sneaky suspicion that He Xuan was lowering his own debt by volunteering to do so, but Shi Qingxuan genuinely just seemed to want to help out. It proved to be useful too, because Xie Lian had immediately tripped on a cloud and would have landed who-knew-where if it hadn't been for the Wind Master and her fan catching him. He still landed in a heap, but at least now he wouldn't be forced to march across a mountain while disoriented and weak.

"You really do have terrible luck," Shi Qingxuan had remarked. "Do you need help up?"

Xie Lian had laughed resignedly and reached out a hand to accept the help back to his feet.

To think this morning he had been feeling dizzy from lifting his head up and down while gardening. That had nothing on the ascent and descent from Heaven, and he wasn't entirely sure the world was ever going to stop spinning again. He really wanted a nap against Hua Cheng about now. He would like to lie in the dark and eat fruit until the dizziness and pain stopped. But he had a job to do.

It was a job, unfortunately, that was becoming more complicated by the moment. Or at least more crowded, which generally amounted to the same thing. The table was already full with Xie Lian, He Xuan, and Shi Qingxuan at it, and it didn't get better when two Middle Court Officials appeared, introducing themselves as Fu Yao and Nan Feng who had apparently volunteered to help.

Their arrival was unexpected enough that it actually got He Xuan, who had been making quick work of the snacks Shi Qingxuan had ordered, to stop and stare at them.

"Don't worry about it, you can go back to your generals," said Shi Qingxuan. "Surely three Upper Court Officials can handle one ghostly bridegroom!"

The two Middle Court Officials did not seem to agree though, both insisting that they were supposed to be here and were definitely expected to help.

"We have this covered, there's no need to trouble Lord Earth Master or Lord Wind Master," said the one calling himself Fu Yao. "We will aid His Highness."

"If it's too crowded, you can always tell that one to scram," Nan Feng offered, gesturing to Fu Yao.

"Ling Wen-zhenjun said that all willing volunteers are welcome, so on what grounds are you telling me to scram?" Fu Yao snapped back.

Xie Lian could feel a well worn argument brewing and he massaged his temples as discreetly as he could. His hat still sat against his back and he was tempted to pull it back on, only it would feel rude while sitting at this cramped table inside the tea shop. But if he wasn't careful, his vision was going to start dissolving at the edges and then it really would be all over.

"Please, let's not argue," said Xie Lian. "Of course all are welcome, thank you for volunteering. The more there are, surely the quicker we will be able to solve this mystery and help the locals."

This seemed to be enough to draw the two Middle Court Officials into a temporary truce, but it made He Xuan heave a sigh. "This is going to get crowded," he intoned.

"What do you mean 'going'?" huffed Fu Yao with a roll of his eyes. "It already is."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. There was no way for Fu Yao or Nan Feng to know, of course, that even now there was a Ghost King strolling around the mountain outside of town, beginning to sniff out the mystery. He had been there ever since Xie Lian had told him where his mission would be taking place. Things were definitely only going to get more crowded, not less.

It was for the best though, he doubted the Officials would appreciate Hua Cheng's ideas about how to make things less crowded.

"Let's see what we can learn around town," Xie Lian suggested, rising and reaching for He Xuan's arm.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao's eyes were boring into him. Or, more specifically, at the point where his arms touched He Xuan's.

"What are— what is His Highness doing?" Nan Feng finally worked up the nerve to ask.

"Hm? Oh, my balance isn't so good these days. Lord Earth Master doesn't mind helping me out."

Fu Yao opened his mouth to say something, but Shi Qingxuan got there first. "You're not going to make a problem out of that, are you?" she demanded, apparently the sort to decide on friendships and loyalties very quickly.

Both Middle Court Officials insisted they wouldn't, but there was no hiding the way they stared at Xie Lian the entire time he walked about, pace slow and unsteady and very familiar in the way he let his weight rest against He Xuan. There was nothing for it though, his head wasn't likely to get better until he caught a chance to sleep off the day's overstimulation and he would rather lean against He Xuan and go slowly than end up on his knees and throwing up because the pain had gotten too serious for even him to ignore.

Maybe they should find a temple to stay at for the night…

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Finding a temple of Nan Yang had been the easiest part, everything else about it had been a fuss. Normally the walk wouldn't have bothered Xie Lian but he was worn down and the group was noisy. He Xuan might have been pleasant company in this situation if they had been on their own as he was content with silence, but the Middle Court Officials seemed to constantly have something to say to each other, and Shi Qingxuan seemed to readily let herself get drawn into any conversation. Fortunately once they had arrived at the temple, Shi Qingxuan had been able to handle the female worshipper with the ripped skirt, and He Xuan had gone over the details of the case with the Middle Court Officials, his tone dry and brusque and brooking no arguments.

There had been a brief disagreement about getting food, but Xie Lian was too sore and nauseous to consider it so he begged off, declaring that he was going to turn in early. Not only would this let him finally rest his head, but it also gave him some uninterrupted time to chat with Hua Cheng through the communication array before he fell asleep. This was the longest he had gone without seeing him in a long time, and he was feeling bereft. He was certain everything would have been much better with Hua Cheng at his side for it, but there was no helping it. This way was best for everyone.

Still, the thought of curling up in Hua Cheng's lap now, of sleeping pressed against his side so his sore head could rest against his cool chest, and the expressions that would surely draw out of Fu Yao and Nan Feng made Xie Lian chuckle softly to himself.

He fell asleep to Hua Cheng's voice in the array, as he recounted what he had already uncovered about the old shrine hidden up the mountain. Together they started to construct a basic plan for Xie Lian to make it up the mountain so that they could finish things off efficiently; part way through Xie Lian had drifted wholly to sleep.

When the nightmare struck, it shouldn't have been unexpected, and yet he was still unprepared. His nightmares were often a strange, unsettling mix of memories and fears, but this one felt particularly real and visceral in a way. Hot hands pressing him down, fingers digging cruelly against the nail when he flailed and fought until he cried and cried and cried and lay limp. Hot hands, hot body pressing down against his own, hot breath on his ear, his neck, against his back, robes pressed up, should be cold, the night air prickling along his skin, but the legs between his were hot, and the thickness pressing against him was hot and it was all too big, too big to be a mortal man, massive chest lying against Xie Lian and crushing the air from him like grave dirt while beads chimed above him and—

He woke on the ground in the dark. There were no butterflies lighting the air and no Ghost King at his side. He was alone on the floor in the dark and his head screamed with pain from the nail and he scrambled to his knees — too fast, too fast — and gagged. His stomach lurched and he was going to throw up. When had he eaten? The man so rarely fed him but his stomach was full and now he was going to throw up and it was going to be awful and—

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian recoiled, swallowing convulsively, and then there was light. Someone was staring at him through the dark with a palm torch lit in his hand.

It was Nan Feng rather than Hua Cheng and it made Xie Lian almost want to weep in frustration. Suddenly it was no longer the labourer's hut he was in, but a different hut entirely, equally wretched but which had surely disintegrated centuries ago.

"Your Highness, are you okay?" Nan Feng asked, voice pitched lower so as not to disrupt the other sleeping bodies around them.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It was just a nightmare… sorry for waking you up."

"I wasn't sleeping. I was… thinking about things. This case," Nan Feng said, staring at him with eyes that reflected the light. "Are you… You said nightmares?"

Xie Lian smiled stiffly. He did not want to talk about this. "Just nightmares. When you've been alive as long as I have, you collect a few."

"I see," Nan Feng said, just as stiffly.

For a moment there was only silence, as neither knew what to say. Xie Lian made to turn around, to wish Nan Feng a good night as he tried to go back to sleep, but at the same time Nan Feng attempted to speak.

"Your Highness seems rather ill — if you don't mind me asking, what happened to you before your ascension? Of course… of course anything can cause an ascension. I heard it was

His Highness's prowess at cultivation that allowed him to ascend the first time. But other times it can be great or terrible feats. Those sorts of things can be hard to live through and can involve as much suffering to the god as anyone else. If Your Highness… if you were hurt and you… and…" He trailed off, clearly uncomfortable and unsure what to say next.

Xie Lian understood the feeling perfectly. "Ah, actually my ascension happened at quite a pleasant moment. Really, don't worry about it! The injury is old, it just hasn't healed yet. Try to get some sleep, don't stay up thinking all night! See you in the morning!"

And with that Xie Lian dove for his sleeping mat in the hopes that it would kill the conversation. It seemed to succeed, because he heard Nan Feng fidget before finally stilling and putting out the palm torch.

A shame, Xie Lian almost wished he had asked him to keep it lit. It would be hard to sleep alone in the dark.

Alone. There was no need for that though, was there?

San Lang? he called out, not even hesitated to use his ridiculous verbal password, and he got his response immediately. With a contented sigh, he closed his eyes. *San Lang, will you tell me a story?*

When he woke the next morning, it was after everyone else had always stirred. They had clearly come to some sort of consensus about letting him sleep, which he could appreciate. After falling asleep to Hua Cheng's fanciful and meandering tale about an aspiring scholar and the tigress she fell in love with, he had rested deeply and woke now without a headache. The vertigo was still stronger today than it usually was when he had just woken from sleep, but that could be managed.

"How are you feeling, Your Highness?" Shi Qingxuan asked as she — or he, as he seemed to be this morning — passed him some breakfast.

Xie Lian could answer truthfully that he was feeling much better. He was also able to share his (and Hua Cheng's) plan with the room at large.

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Which was how Xie Lian had ended up in a bridal sedan, wearing a bridal gown, beneath a bridal veil. Xie Lian thought that Hua Cheng had seemed, perhaps, a bit too enthusiastic when he had first tossed out this idea, but it was the one to which the other Heavenly Officials ultimately agreed. If anything, Shi Qingxuan had been almost as enthusiastic as Hua Cheng about it.

"Ming-xiong, we should switch forms as well!"

"How would that make any sense, if we're supposed to be guarding the procession?" Nan Feng had demanded.

"We could be the accompanying maids!"

"Whatever, anything so that we don't need to watch you hobble up a mountain," Fu Yao had grumbled, side-eying Xie Lian. Which was a little unfair in Xie Lian's opinion. He was much better now that his headache from yesterday was gone, and he would be even better if his walking stick hadn't been left somewhere in the gardens of Paradise Manor.

But it got them on the case and up the mountain so Xie Lian wasn't arguing. The next job was sending everyone else off so he could fully conduct and conclude the investigation. He Xuan had obligingly led away Shi Qingxuan — both in their female forms, though He Xuan had sent him a threatening look when he had changed, warning him not to comment — under some pretence in order to check out a lead that Hua Cheng had fed He Xuan. Something about a bandaged boy. As for Fu Yao and Nan Feng, they had left at Xie Lian's request to protect the mortals. Now all Xie Lian had to do was rest and wait. It was the most peace he had managed to find since ascending. The swaying of the carried sedan had not been pleasant given his current dizziness, and it really had been quite nice to have it lowered back to the ground and for the noises outside to fade for the time being.

His wait paid off.

It was hard to make out past the heavy veil over his face, but the curtains of the bridal sedan parted, and Xie Lian could just see a very familiar, pale hand held out in front of him. Undemanding, but a gentle offer.

Without hesitating, Xie Lian took it and stood, letting the hand guide him from within the sedan.

"May I lift the bride's veil?" asked a familiar voice.

"Please! It's really inconvenient for brides, not to be able to see anything," said Xie Lian.

Hua Cheng reached out and very delicately lifted the veil, and Xie Lian could only smile up at him. If Xie Lian didn't know better, Hua Cheng could be easily mistaken for a real ghostly bridegroom, dressed in red and silver as he was, with ethereal little butterflies floating around his head. The affection that surged through Xie Lian seemed to burn out every inconvenience of the past couple days, and it was suddenly as if they were once more entirely alone, with no urgency to do anything but enjoy one another's company in the gardens of Paradise Manor.

"Gege, I missed you terribly," Hua Cheng was bemoaning playfully. "Only being able to listen to your voice but needing to sleep all alone? I was so cold!"

"I thought ghosts didn't need to sleep though."

"So cruel, to keep bringing that up. I've seen the error of my ways, I like sleeping when gege is there."

Xie Lian liked it when Hua Cheng was there as well.

"The sooner we resolve this, the sooner we can go home and have a nap."

Hua Cheng perked up at that. “Gege is so smart. There’s a temple just up the mountain — the ghost is just some pitiful wraith, and not a bridegroom at all. Shall we go?”

“Yes… only, don’t you think I might need some more spiritual energy, if we’re going to go face this ghost?”

Hua Cheng waved his hand dismissively. “She’s trivial, gege, I’ll take care of this chore.”

Xie Lian reached out and placed a hand on Hua Cheng’s cheek, ensuring he was looking at him, seeing his expression clearly.

“I meant, I would like some more spiritual power, if you don’t mind sharing.”

Hua Cheng’s single eye blinked, as if dazed, before he eagerly agreed. He made to reach for Xie Lian’s hand, but Xie Lian lifted it up out of his reach. At first Hua Cheng seemed confused, like a dog who’s toy had just been taken away, but then Xie Lian put both hands on Hua Cheng’s cheeks, so that he had his head cradled gently in his hold. The realisation that bolted across Hua Cheng’s face was so immediate and consuming that it made Xie Lian feel warmed right from his chest. And just a little light-headed at the knowledge that he had done that, and Hua Cheng very, very clearly liked it.

“If San Lang doesn’t mind,” he demurred.

Hua Cheng’s pupil was blown wide. He moved hesitatingly, unsure, like someone testing the water. He leaned closer, and slowly — so terribly slowly and carefully — he pressed his lips lightly against Xie Lian’s. They were dry and cool and exactly as soft as he imagined they would be.

He had wondered, before, if he might like something like this. If it would feel too intimate. If it would scare him or disgust him. The very idea of thinking that now was laughable; it took everything in his power not to forget himself and just fling himself around Hua Cheng’s neck and chase his lips as he pulled back. Instead he kept his hands resting lovingly against Hua Cheng’s cheeks.

“San Lang forgot the spiritual power,” Xie Lian remarked, a grin sneaking across his face.

Hua Cheng blinked again, startled. “Ah, apologies, let me try again—”

“San Lang can try as many times as he would like,” Xie Lian promised serenely.

That seemed to unstick something in Hua Cheng, because suddenly he was pressing in again, his hands coming to sit at Xie Lian’s waist while his mouth pressed and pressed and pressed against Xie Lian’s, and Xie Lian no longer bothered holding himself back. He threw his arms around Hua Cheng’s neck and allowed himself to be held and kissed and cherished. As he allowed himself to hold and kiss and cherish Hua Cheng.

(In the end, when they finally remembered they had a job to do and if they didn’t get to it soon then Heavenly Officials would start walking in on them, Xie Lian practically sizzled

with spiritual energy. He swore he had so much in his body right then that it was making his hair frizz.)

(It did make it quite easy to handle the matter of the ghost bride.)

(Handling the matter of the other meeting Hua Cheng was a whole separate and frankly more complicated issue, even if he had taken on his San Lang skin once more. Hua Cheng was not being helpful, in the way he clung to Xie Lian and smirked provocatively at the Middle Court Officials the whole time Xie Lian attempted to explain this companion he had made during his banishment, how San Lang had "helped him out of a tough spot".)

(Somehow this just seemed to make Fu Yao and Nan Feng testier.)

(Somehow Xie Lian suspected this would not be as easy as finishing the job, reporting back to the Heavenly Capital to pay off his debt, and then quietly returning to Ghost City…)

Somehow, his life was getting very crowded indeed.

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